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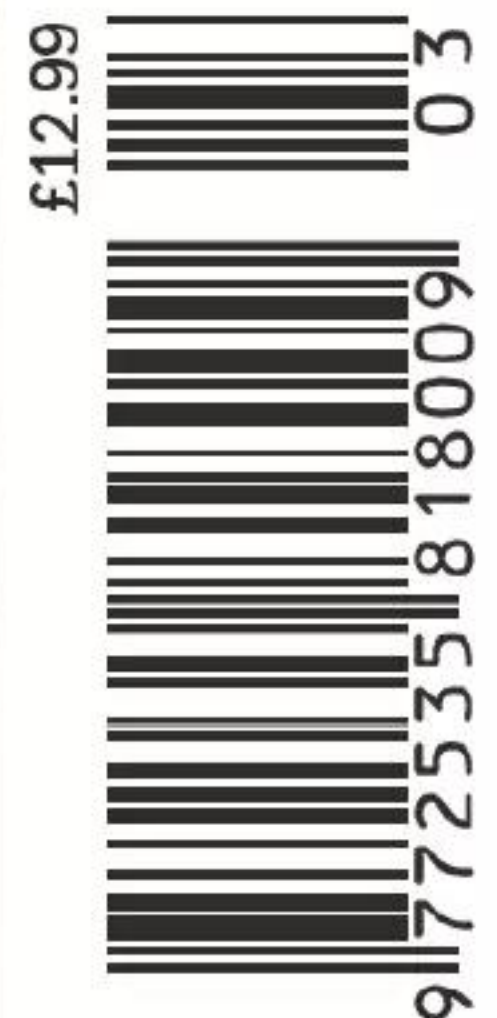
Bringing
History to Life

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

180
DRAMA-PACKED
PAGES

THE EASTERN FRONT

WWII's bloodiest battlefield



OPERATION BARBAROSSA

Hitler broke his pact with Stalin and sent millions of soldiers across the border



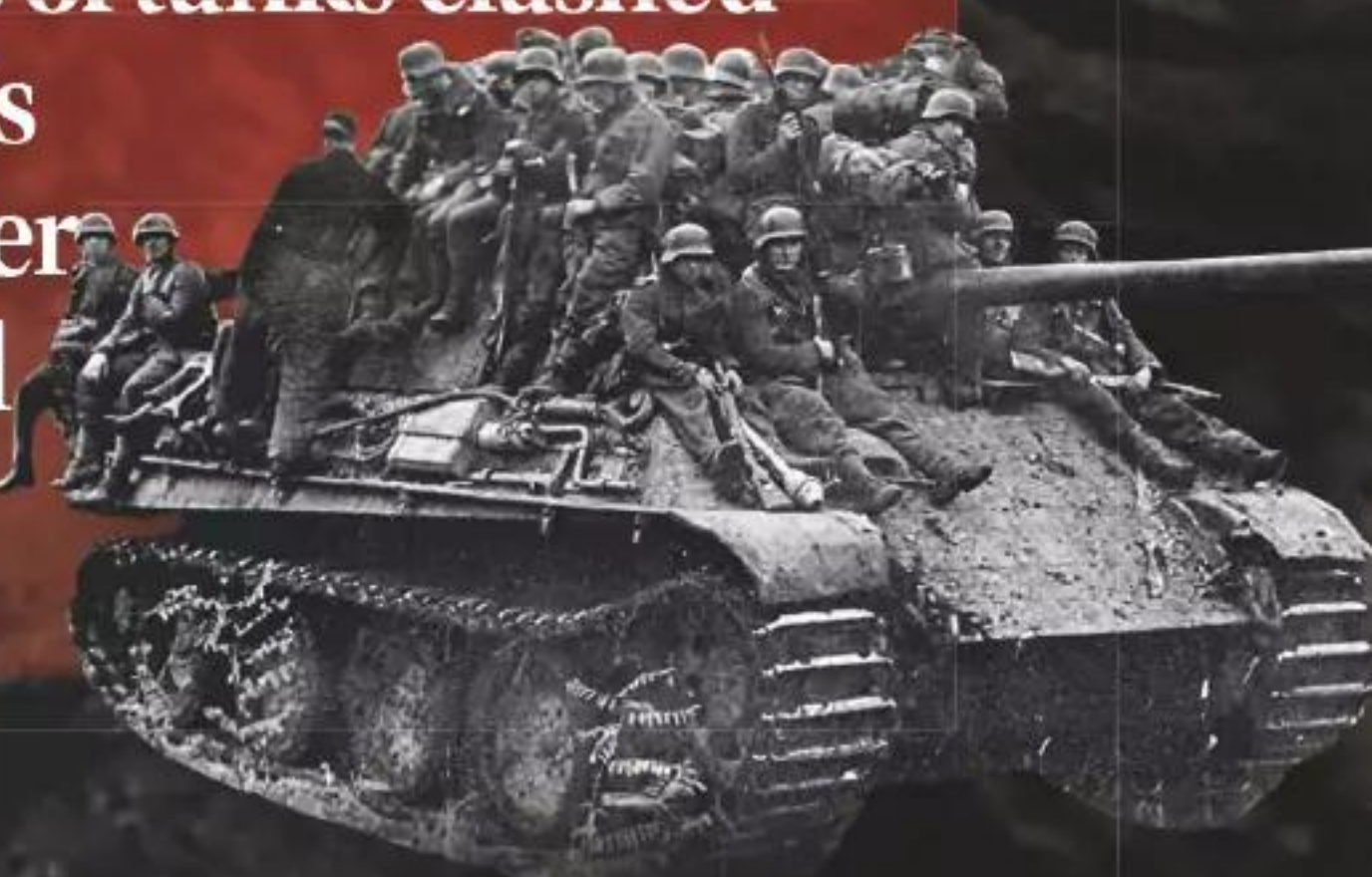
DOOMSDAY AT STALINGRAD

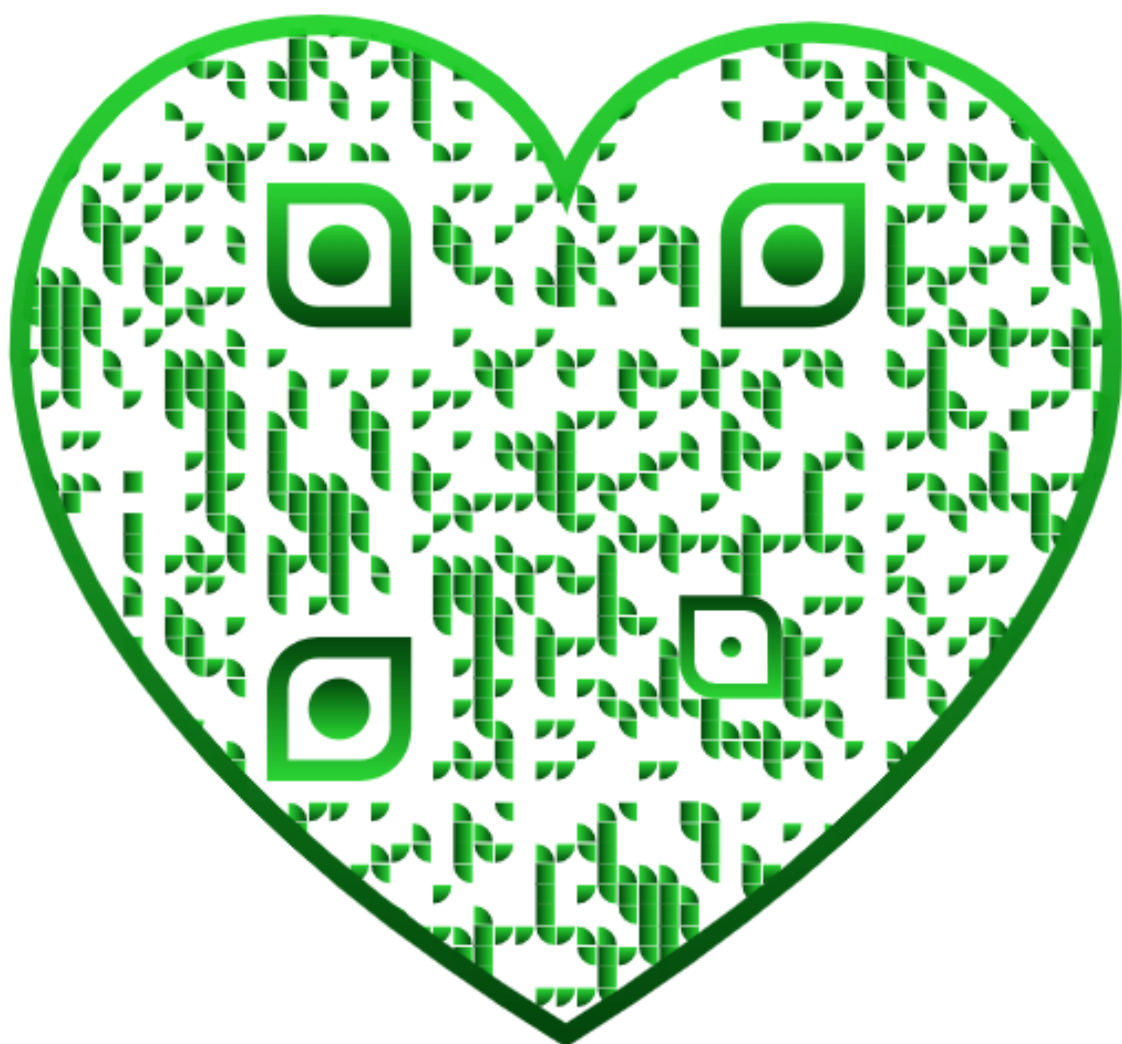
How the brutal and gruelling battle became the ultimate test of World War II



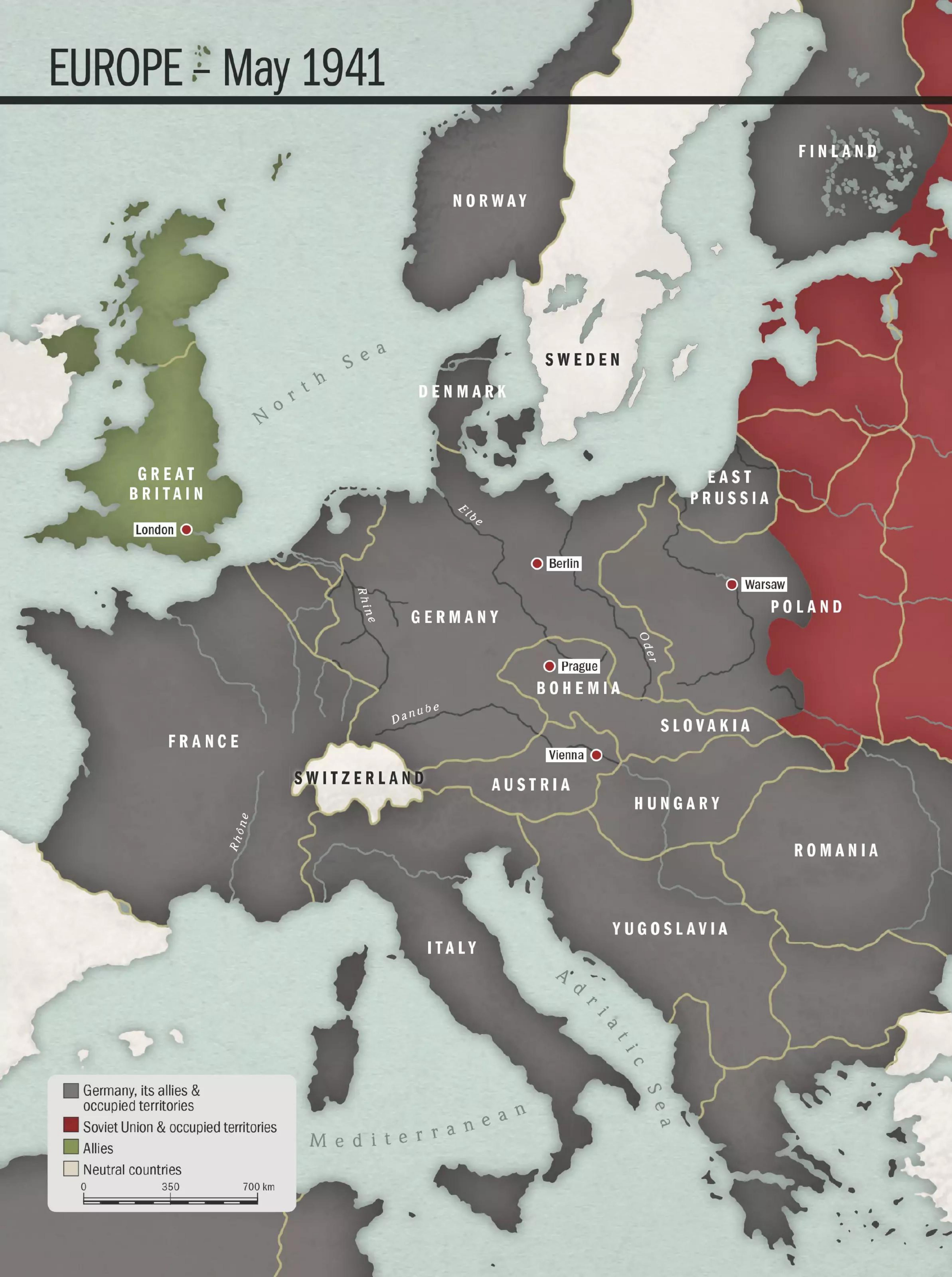
BATTLE OF KURSK

Hundreds of tanks clashed in history's largest-ever armoured stand-off





EUROPE – May 1941



WELCOME

In the summer of 1941, the future of Europe was at stake. On 22nd June 1941, at 03.15, the first German soldiers crossed the border into the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa – the invasion of the great enemy to the east – was under way, and Hitler's plan to carve out *Lebensraum* (living space) for the Germans was finally to be put into effect.

The invasion was the beginning of a war without rules, the brutality of which bore comparison with the darkest Middle Ages.

One year later Nazi Germany stood ready for another major offensive in Stalingrad. The bitter fighting in the ruins, the horrors on the dark waters of the Volga River and the intense air war over the city cost hundreds and hundreds of soldiers and civilians their lives. The battle was so exhausting and cruel that even World War II's hardest generals couldn't help but be affected by the massive casualties. It became clear that whoever won the battle would win the war.

By 1943, Adolf Hitler realised that the German Army was no longer capable of fighting an offensive war. His message was clear: for the next year, it would instead defend its positions and let the Red Army exhaust itself in futile attacks. But as we know, that's not how history turned out.

The Führer was persuaded to make a fateful decision: all forces were to be deployed to the front line salient where they would trap the Red Army near the city of Kursk. On 5th July 1943, Soviet artillery shattered the silence of the balmy Russian summer night.

Enjoy the issue!

○ Moscow

SOVIET UNION

TURKEY

The Geneva Convention
was suspended on the Eastern Front, where millions of dead people offered visible proof of Hitler's madness.



“Animals flee this hell;
the hardest stones
cannot bear it for long;
only men endure.”

Red Army officer to Soviet war reporter Vasily Grossman.



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The Germans secretly sent millions of troops to the Soviet border for a new blitzkrieg in the hope of subjugating the entire European continent. **Page 6**

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War's last eyewitnesses

Semen Chtipelman was at Leningrad in 1941. He was one of only a few from his unit to survive the fighting and see the war through to its bitter end. **Page 36**

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As the Germans stormed towards Leningrad, massive defences were built around the city. The Germans had to be stopped. **Page 40**

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The Germans were certain that all they needed to win the war was to take Moscow. So the generals sent their exhausted troops forward in one final offensive. **Page 52**

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An inferno of fire rains down on Stalingrad in August, reducing the city to a heap of rubble that burns for months. The Luftwaffe rules the skies, but the Soviets turn the Germans' own strategy against them. **Page 70**

Rat war in the ruins

No buildings remain standing in Stalingrad as German infantry take the city's suburbs. But the ruins will prove disastrous for the Germans as they're forced into brutal hand-to-hand combat for every inch. **Page 84**

Doomsday awaited in Stalingrad

In December 1942, the German 6th Army is surrounded, and as the harsh Russian winter closes in, defeat becomes final. At least 100,000 Germans end up in Soviet captivity. **Page 110**

Arms race to decide the war

The Germans know that the war cannot be won without new weapons. Too many men have lost their lives, so it's vital to develop tanks and aircraft that can protect crews and pilots as well as secure victories in 1943. **Page 126**

The not-so-secret attack

Early on the morning of 5th July 1943, Soviet artillery begins a massive bombardment of German lines. The Battle of Kursk is underway. **Page 140**

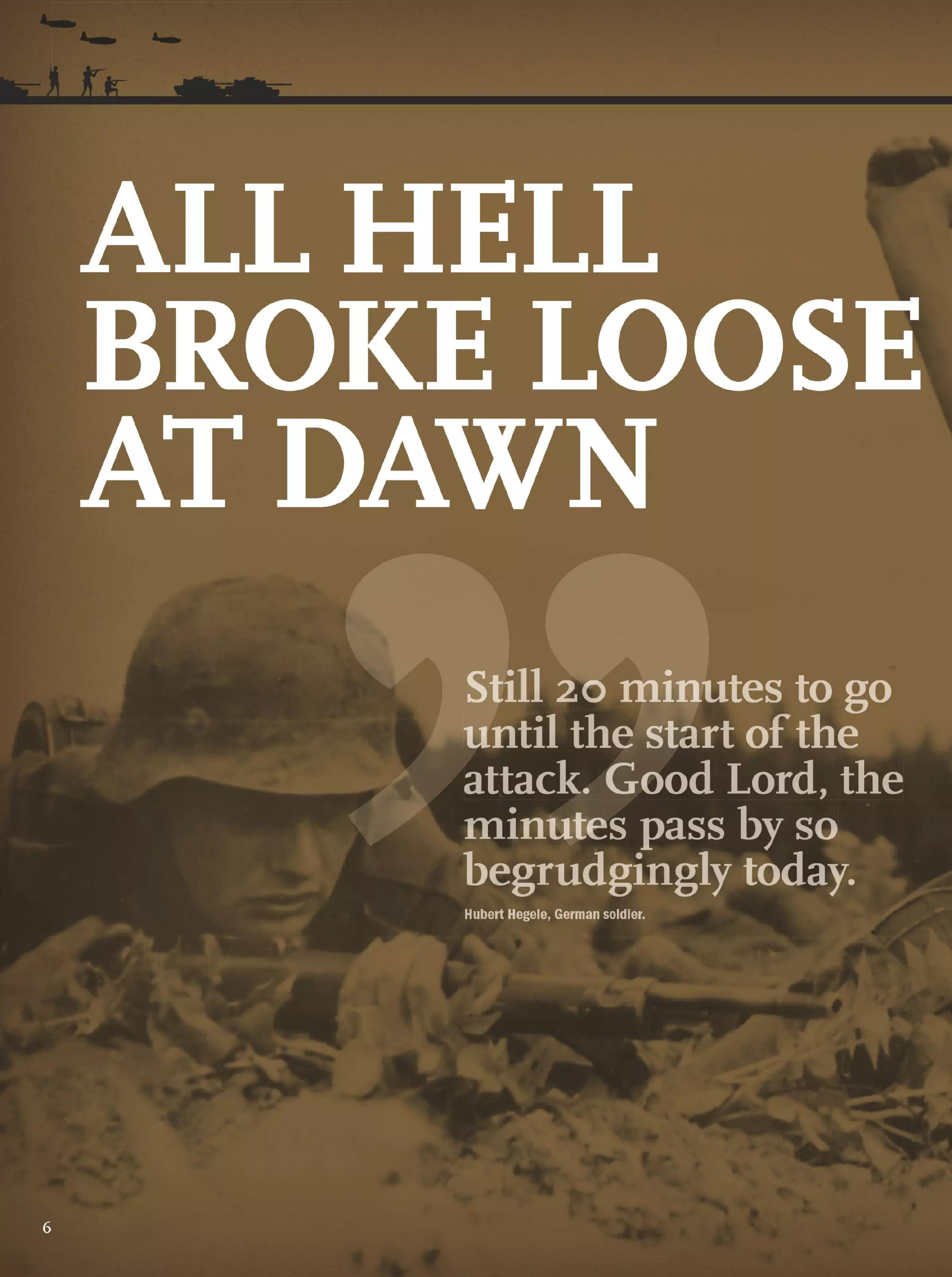
If you didn't get killed, you were lucky

Wolfgang Kloth fought at Kursk where only chance determined who survived. **Page 158**

Death match on the plain

The offensive culminates on sloping terrain near the village of Prokhorovka. Here, a thousand tanks crash together in the Battle of Kursk's decisive encounter. **Page 162**

The advance on Stalingrad
was made more difficult in unfamiliar terrain that nullified German blitzkrieg tactics.



ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE AT DAWN

Still 20 minutes to go
until the start of the
attack. Good Lord, the
minutes pass by so
begrudgingly today.

Hubert Hegele, German soldier.

22nd June 1941

At 03.15 on 22nd June, German soldiers launched Operation Barbarossa. Along an extensive front, millions of soldiers poured into the Soviet Union.



All hell broke loose at dawn

By Benjamin Christensen

In the summer of 1941, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were, on paper, allies. But Germany was determined to crush the Soviet Bear and had secretly sent millions of troops to the Soviet border. Now, with another blitzkrieg, it planned to ensure Germany's total domination of the European continent.

On 21st June 1941, the largest army the world had ever seen lined up along the 1,500-kilometre border with the Soviet Union. Millions of German, Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian and Finnish soldiers were ready to attack. For weeks, rumours had been circulating among the soldiers. Some thought that the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, had attempted a coup in Moscow, and they were there to support it. Among the more fanciful rumours was that, with Stalin's permission, they were to pass through the Soviet Union to attack British territory in India and the Middle East. Some of the soldiers, however, were convinced that Germany's ally, the Soviet Union itself, was the target of the enormous operation, but doubts lingered. As they did with Private Hubert Hegele, who was on the southern front in June:

"An attack on the Soviet Union? Well, we don't believe that at all. First of all, Germany has a friendship pact and a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union; and secondly – a battle against this vast empire? No, that won't happen."

On the other side of the border, most Soviet officers were also convinced that there wouldn't be a war any time soon. When a staff officer asked the commander of the Western Front, General Dimitry Pavlov, whether preparations should be made for a German attack, the general stood up, pushed all the papers off the table he had been sitting at, and shouted angrily:

"War is possible, but not in the near future. Now we must prepare for the autumn manoeuvres and make sure that no alarmist answers German provocations with fire."

In Germany, however, Hitler needed no excuse. On the evening of 21st June, the army High Command sent a message to all units on the border containing a single word: "Dortmund." It was the code word signifying that at 03.15, the German Army would begin its attack on the Soviet Union.

All along the front, German soldiers were preparing for battle. There was a strange calm before all hell would break loose in a few hours, recalled Private Hans Roth, who was on the central part of the border near the Soviet village of Movnyky, on the opposite side of the Bug River. He noted in his diary:

"The attack starts tonight at 03.00. We are attached to the von Kleist group. Our assignment: a rapid

putsch in wedge formation, regardless of casualties. For the moment there is a quiet, wonderful twilight peacefulness over the countryside. The huts in the village will be in flames in a few hours; the air will be filled with the howling and screeching of shells. The impact of the shelling will tear apart the fields and roads. How amazing it is that we are once again part of this offensive – fighting under Kleist. Farewell my wife and sweet Erika. Farewell my beloved parents. You will be in my thoughts tomorrow. Do not worry; a soldier's luck will be with me."

Hubert Hegele, who'd considered an attack on the Soviet Union impossible a few hours earlier, noted:

"02.55 hours. Still 20 minutes to go until the start of the attack. Good Lord, the minutes pass by so begrudgingly today. ... We are just 20 metres from the border fence. The concentration of our assault troops has succeeded perfectly. The enemy has noticed nothing. The Russian sentries standing on their observation post haven't a clue. It's just two men, but they'll be the first to go down. 03.06 hours. If I could only smoke a cigarette. The sky is now cloudless and the stars are shining down on us insignificant souls... You cannot grasp hold of sober thoughts in these final minutes – but you hardly need to. I make a little prayer and ask the Good Lord to stand by my side."

"03.10 hours. Still five minutes. The faces of my comrades look like grey masks. Their gaze is fixed straight ahead. The pounding in our chests grows stronger and stronger. The pioneers begin – very quietly, so you can hardly hear it – to cut a couple of pathways through the wire with their large shears. We still have two minutes to go."

Red Army was unprepared

On the Soviet side of the border, few suspected anything. True, there had been more activity on the German side in the past week, and in some places the noise of German trucks and tanks revving their engines had been heard. However, little and conflicting intelligence had been received from the army command.

At 01.00 on 22nd June, a message ticked in to the various army units, warning that the Germans were ready to attack, but that they must not be provoked under any circumstances. The order was confusing for many officers, who didn't know whether they ►

The M24 hand grenade was standard equipment for German soldiers.



Soldiers carried the grenade on their belt so they could grab it quickly.

Flat, desolate steppe met the Germans in many places after they crossed the border to the Soviet Union. Nothing prevented the invasion from advancing.



Soviet Union would be sent to Siberia



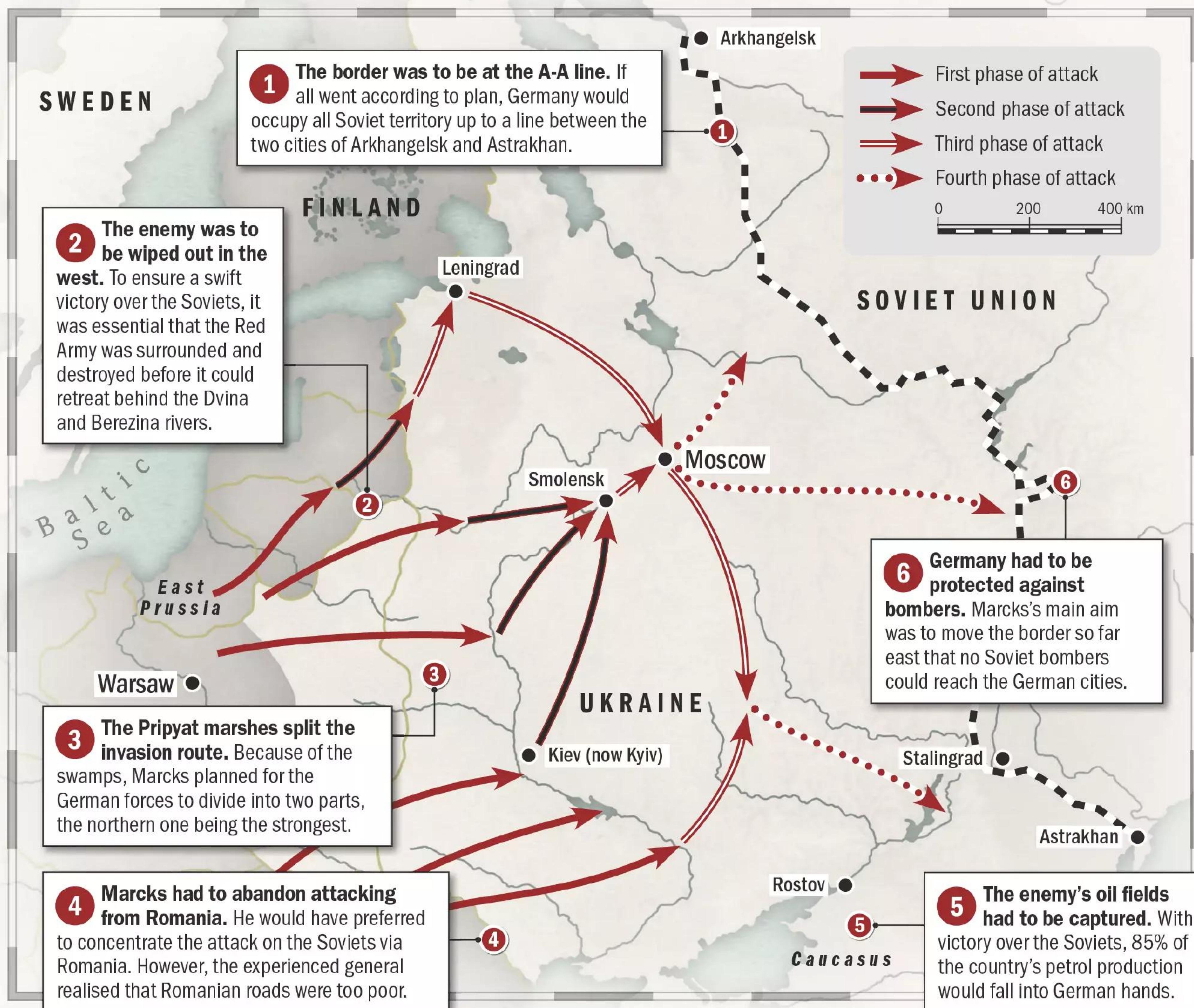
In summer 1940, after the occupation of France, German General Erich Marcks was asked to draw up a plan for a future war against the Soviet Union. Marcks's proposal, Operation Draft East, aimed to defeat the Red Army and occupy the main industrial areas of the Soviet Union. The early draft, with some modifications, became the basis of the final invasion plans of Operation Barbarossa. Marcks wanted to protect Germany from future Soviet aggression by moving the border so far east that German cities would forever be out of reach of Soviet

bombers. In the draft plan, he therefore proposed that the attack should not cease until the German Army had created a border running from Arkhangelsk on the White Sea in the north to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea in the south – one it dubbed the A-A line.

The general envisaged that all operational objectives – including the capture of Moscow – could be achieved in nine to 17 weeks. In reality, the Red Army and the Russian winter came between Hitler and the A-A line. When the Germans came closest to their objective in 1941, they were still around 400 km away.



According to German plans, *blitzkrieg* would move the border far to the east.



In a snatch we are on the other side of the river where rattling machine-gun fire awaits us. We have our first casualties. ■ Hans Roth, German soldier.

should return fire if the enemy attacked. But few places took the warning seriously. Besides, the 22nd was a Sunday and many units had chosen to give their soldiers the day off. The commander of the Soviet Western Front, General Dimitry Pavlov, for example, was in Minsk to see an operetta with his officers when he received the message. However, he didn't believe that the news should prevent him and his officers from watching the end of the show. They could return to their units afterwards.

The Soviet army leadership wasn't very worried either. When General Pavlov contacted Marshal Semyon Timoshenko by telephone, he was told:

"Just try to worry less and don't panic. Get the staff together anyway this morning, because something unpleasant may happen perhaps, but don't rise to any provocation."

A few units were sent to the border, but not too many, because Stalin had not yet given up the idea of negotiating with Hitler to secure peace.

Attack was planned in detail

While confusion and chaos reigned on the Soviet side, German officers were fully aware of what was to happen in the coming hours, days and weeks. The 1,500-kilometre border had been divided into three parts, each to be dealt with by a separate Army Group.

The plan was for German infantry to cross the border and crush the few Soviet forces that resisted, then for panzer troops to advance at speed behind enemy lines, create confusion and then surround the foe, capturing and wiping out Soviet units in large pincer manoeuvres.

If all went as the German High Command had planned, the Red Army would be wiped out and the European part of the Soviet Union would be in Germany's hands before winter set in. The war would effectively be over, and the Soviet Union reduced to a German vassal state.

On the German side of the border, Hubert Hegele looked over to two Soviet border guards, who had no idea anything untoward was happening.

"03.15 hours. Finally! ... [A]ll eyes are on the hand of the assault troop leader. And with the raising of his hand, two shots from our sharpshooters resound through the night. The two Russian sentries collapse. The campaign against the Soviet Union has begun."

Elsewhere on the front, German Hans Roth and his unit were ready to storm across the Bug River and attack the Soviet bunkers on the opposite bank:

"All of a sudden, at exactly 03.15 hours, and apparently out of the blue, an opening salvo emerges from the barrels of hundreds of guns of all calibres. ... It is impossible to comprehend one's world in such an inferno. Our homeland is still innocently asleep while here death is already collecting a rich harvest. We crouch in our holes with pallid but

resolved faces while counting the minutes until we storm the Bug fortifications."

One of the Soviet border fortifications was the old Brest Fortress, built in the 19th century. The German artillery also launched a devastating bombardment there. Private German Walther Loos listened with his comrades to the sound of howling shells:

"Involuntarily ducking our heads, we were almost forgetting to breathe. However, a second later the artillery fire of a different heavy gun gathered such a deafening and breath-taking strength like I never experienced later. Even those participants in World War I among us later acknowledged that at that time, they had never experienced fire of such concentrated power. The sky turned red, and even though it was night, it became as light as day. Large trees fringing the Bug swayed wildly and were torn to pieces as if from an invisible force by the atmospheric pressure of the passing shells."

German soldiers crossed the border

All along the border, the Soviet positions were subjected to a brutal and devastating bombardment from thousands of German guns, and the Soviet soldiers staggered out of their bunkers, tents and barracks, sleep-deprived, confused and in shock.

*"It is now 03.30 hours. A whistle sounds; we quickly jump out from undercover and at an insane speed cross the 20 metres to the inflatable boats. In a snatch we are on the other side of the river where rattling machine-gun fire awaits us. We have our first casualties,"*wrote German soldier Hans Roth.

"With the help of a few ofsturm-pionieren [assault pioneers], we slowly – much too slowly – eat through the barbed wire barriers. Meanwhile, shells fire into the bunkers at Molnikow. In a few short steps we are able to advance to the first bunker, arriving in its blind spot. The Reds fire like mad but are unable to reach us. ... An explosive specialist approaches the bunker from behind and shoves in ►

ERICH MARCKS (1891-1944)

When the head of the German Army High Command chose General Erich Marcks to draw up a plan for the invasion of the Soviet Union, it was no accident. Since joining the army in 1910, Marcks had distinguished himself with his great organisational talent. The attack on the Soviet Union, however, came at a high cost to Marcks. In the first days of the invasion, he was wounded in the leg, which had to be amputated to save his life. He continued as a general in the army until he was killed in Normandy in 1944.





Huge quantities of useful Soviet equipment and weapons fell into German hands during the first weeks of the war.

a short-fused bomb into the bunker's fire hole. The bunker shook and black smoke emerged from its openings, signalling its final doom. We move on."

The Soviet border guards were taken completely by surprise, and communication with the units behind the front was slow. German commandos had been the first to sneak across the border the night before, destroying telegraph and telephone lines, leaving most Soviet front-line units without a direct channel to headquarters and having to rely on messengers.

"During the night the messenger, Anisimov, from the border post ... came by and reported that the Germans had set pontoons in the water and were preparing to cross the river. No orders were received from the divisional staff. The wire communications had been cut by saboteurs," recalled Soviet artilleryman Anatolij Kazakov.

Soon German panzer units were rolling over bridges that had been captured before the Soviet border guards could blow them up. Elsewhere along the Bug River, German tanks had been adapted so they could cross the river underwater.

Luftwaffe ruled the air

As the German Army attacked, thousands of Luftwaffe planes took off to bomb Soviet airbases, railways and military installations. One of the pilots, Lieutenant Arnold Döring, noticed in amazement that there was no one to stop them:

"The ground below is covered with haze, but the targets nevertheless are clearly visible. I am surprised that we are not met with any counteraction. This will come as a surprise to those below!"

At one of the Soviet airbases, pilot Alexander Khaila was on the ground, and there the Germans' attack did indeed come as a surprise: *"It rained heavily*

during the night of 21st/22nd June, and when the alarm sounded no one wanted to get up, as everyone thought it was yet another training exercise. Our entire training process was a series of alarms and they came almost every Sunday."

At another airbase, Ivan Gaidenko also heard the air raid warning, but he wasn't worried either:

"We assumed it was a training alarm and ran to our white planes ... warmed up the engines and prepared for take-off. We prepared photo cameras and attached dummy concrete bombs just in case. No one realised it was a real alarm."

Meanwhile, Arnold Döring and hundreds of his fellow German pilots all along the front dropped the first bombs on the still unsuspecting Soviet air force:

"The 'eggs' are released. Piles of fire and smoke, fountains of earth and dust, mixed with wreckage parts of all kinds, are shooting vertically upward. Unfortunately, our bomb rows lay to the right side of the ammunition bunkers. But a whole row of bombs goes down across the entire field and ploughs the runway. ... As the formation makes a turn, I can see 15 of the parked fighters go up in flames."

Hundreds of Soviet aircraft were destroyed before their pilots could get airborne. And the few pilots who did take off – untrained as they were – were easy prey for the experienced German fighter pilots. One of the few Soviet pilots who managed to launch a counter-attack on the German invaders on 22nd June was Vitaly Klimenko. Together with his unit commander, he fired at advancing German columns. But when the two pilots returned to base, they were met with a fierce diatribe from their regimental commander:

"Arrest them. No flights for these two. Who permitted you to strafe those columns? Do you know what's going on? I don't. Maybe you are responsible for an act of provocation. Maybe those were friendly troops."

During the first day of the invasion, the Luftwaffe destroyed 76 Soviet airbases. Major-General of Aviation Ivan Kopets, commander of the air forces on the Soviet Western Front, flew a reconnaissance circuit over his damaged airbases. In the area he was responsible for, half the aircraft had been disabled on the first day of the war. Dismayed by the situation, he committed suicide immediately after landing.

Confusion in the Red Army

For officers in the Soviet Union's 4th Army, the morning had brought one German aerial bombardment after another, and now ground forces were heading for their headquarters in Kobrin. The Soviets were hurriedly packing everything up, ready to evacuate, as the town's public address system blared out the daily news. Everyone stopped to listen:

"It's six o'clock, Moscow time. We begin our broadcast of the latest news." The officers pricked ►

FACTS

In a matter of hours, the Germans smashed the **Red Army's entire chain of command** with Operation Barbarossa – from the privates at the front to the army command in Moscow. That is why it took several days for Soviet leaders to understand the full scale of the disaster and that their troops were in retreat across the board.



Directive sealed Soviet Union's fate

In Führer Directive 21, Hitler laid out the goal of the forthcoming invasion of the Soviet Union and, more importantly, how it would proceed.

During World War II, Hitler issued a series of directives – orders and instructions to military and civilian personnel on the conduct of the war and the management of captured territories. On 18th December 1940, he issued his 21st, dealing with war against Nazi Germany's greatest ideological

enemy – the Soviet Union. In it, the coming invasion of the Bear to the East was referred to as Operation Barbarossa for the first time, after Frederick Barbarossa – the red-bearded Holy Roman Emperor and crusader who conquered northern Italy in the 12th century. Hitler's hope was that a lightning

victory over the Soviets would force the British to the negotiating table and consolidate Germany's status as Europe's undisputed superpower.

"We have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down," the Führer confidently declared.

DIRECTIVE NO. 21: The order was Hitler's Führer Directive No. 21 and it declared, "The German Wehrmacht must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign (Operation Barbarossa) even before the conclusion of the war against England."

Anlage 3

Der Führer und Oberste Befehlshaber
der Wehrmacht

F. H. Qu., den 18. 12. 40

OKW/WFSt/Abt. L (I) Nr. 33 408/40 g. K. Chefs.

Weisung Nr. 21 Fall Barbarossa.

Die deutsche Wehrmacht muß darauf vorbereitet sein, auch vor Beendigung des Krieges gegen England, Sowjetrußland in einem schnellen Feldzug niederzuwerfen (Fall Barbarossa).

Die Vorbereitungen der Oberkommandos sind auf folgender Grundlage zu treffen:

I.) Allgemeine Absicht:

Die im westlichen Rußland stehende Masse des russischen Heeres soll in kühnen Operationen unter weitem Vortreiben von Panzerkeilen vernichtet, der Abzug kampfkraftiger Teile in die Weite des russischen Raumes verhindert werden.

In rascher Verfolgung ist dann eine Linie zu erreichen, aus der die russische Luftwaffe reichsdeutsches Gebiet nicht mehr angreifen kann. Das Endziel der Operation ist die Abschirmung gegen das asiatische Rußland aus der allgemeinen Linie Wolga – Archangelsk. So kann erforderlichenfalls das letzte Rußland verbleibende Industriegebiet am Ural durch die Luftwaffe ausgeschaltet werden.

II.) Voraussichtliche Verbündete und deren Aufgaben:

III.) Die Führung der Operationen:

A.) Heer (in Genehmigung der mir vorgetragenen Absichten):

In dem durch die Pripjetsümpfe in eine südliche und eine nördliche Hälfte getrennten Operationsraum ist der Schwerpunkt nördlich dieses Gebietes zu bilden. Hier sind 2 Heeresgruppen vorzusehen.

THE RED ARMY HAD TO BE DESTROYED:

"The mass of the Russian Army in western Russia is to be destroyed in daring operations ... and the retreat of units ... is to be prevented," Hitler ordered. The plans of attack were to be based on that strategy.

ALLIES: Hitler counted on help from his allies. On the flanks of the attack, Romania and Finland would attack in the south and north respectively. Hitler also believed that he could use the Swedish road and rail network.

The populace greets us joyfully, some with tears in their eyes. ■ Gerhard Bopp, German soldier.

up their ears, hoping that the bulletin would tell them what was going on at the front. But the broadcast was all about the excellent harvest, bombings in Britain, hostilities in Syria and a weather forecast. The German Army's invasion of the Soviet Union, which had now been under way for several hours, was not mentioned at all. Instead, the broadcast continued with a morning workout: *"Time for exercise. Stretch your arms out, bend! Livelier! Up, down. Livelier!"* The officers looked at each other in disbelief as they heard the sound of German bombers in the distance.

In the port of Sevastopol, Admiral Oktyabrsky was in contact with the army command in Moscow, as his naval base was under air attack. But Moscow refused to believe the admiral, who shouted into the phone:

"Yes, yes, we are being bombed. Just now a bomb exploded quite close to staff headquarters."

In the background, one of his officers was amazed

that Moscow didn't believe the admiral, and sure enough, the head of the Soviet security service NKVD, Lavrenti Beria, called up the admiral shortly afterwards to inform him that Sevastopol was not being bombed. On the Soviet side of the border, the vast majority of soldiers not directly on the front line were still completely unaware of the ongoing attack and were now getting up for another day.

"The morning of 22nd June was magnificent," recalled Polish Fred Virski, who was drafted into the Soviet army after Poland's occupation.

"From the soaked tents, from the ground and from the trees, a thick mist rose into the sky. The sun was merrily warming the countryside. We dragged ourselves out of the wet blankets and hung our clothes on ropes and branches. Since it was Sunday and no duties were expected, we wandered among the tents in bathing trunks. Contrary to regulations, we had breakfast in the tents, as our uniforms were



not dry enough to put on." It wasn't until noon that Fred Virski's artillery unit was called to assemble.

"We put on our still-humid clothes. In the neighbouring regiment from Kharkov, the same feverish commotion reigned. We asked Karpyenko what had happened. 'I don't know,' he said. 'But something very important.' 'Maybe a war,' suggested Walter. We looked at him as if he'd gone crazy. ... Half an hour after the commotion had started, the regiment was assembled on the square in front of the mess. In the centre, two trucks took the place of a tribune. On one of them stood a tremendous portrait of Stalin... The major and the commissar stepped on to the tribune. The commissar raised his arm, indicating that he was about to speak. A tense silence fell over the square," Virski later recalled.

"This morning," the commissioner began, "our deadly enemy, Germany, bombed our cities and villages without

warning. The commissar of foreign affairs, Molotov, pronounced a historic speech declaring war!"

Some time passed in incredulous silence as the soldiers digested the news. Then the quiet was broken by the voice of Molotov announcing the attack over the loudspeaker. Stalin himself was too shocked to break the news, so Molotov had to step in:

"Today, at four o'clock in the morning, German troops have entered our country, without making any demands on the Soviet Union and without a declaration of war. They have attacked our borders in many places and have subjected our towns – Zhitomir, Kyiv, Sevastopol, Kaunas and some others – to aerial bombardments during which more than 200 people have been killed or wounded," Molotov began.

All over the Soviet Union, people listened to the foreign minister's speech, and as Molotov spoke expressionlessly of the attacks on border posts and cities, a spirit of resistance spread among the ►

The German forces were divided into three: North, Centre and South. On the northern front and in the centre, the Germans quickly broke through the Soviet lines, while in the south resistance was unexpectedly fierce.



How wonderful it is that we are able to exterminate these murderous beasts. How good it is that we have pre-empted them. ■ Hans Roth, German soldier.

population. In Moscow and several other cities, people flocked to army recruitment offices, where thousands signed up for military service. Among units like Virski's, far from the front, preparations for mobilisation began. Virski's friend optimistically believed they would be in Berlin within a month. The same attitude was not to be found among the soldiers already fighting at the front, however. There, position after position was being overrun by German troops who, as well as having caught the Red Army completely off guard, were also numerically superior.

Brest Fortress stood firm

All along the front, German forces were advancing. On the first day alone, panzer forces such as those of General Hermann Hoth reached 50-70 kilometres into Soviet territory and captured key bridges over the Nemunas River. In several places, the German invaders were welcomed as liberators – including in Lithuania, as German soldier Gerhard Bopp discovered as he marched through Vilnius:

"The populace greets us joyfully, some with tears in their eyes. The girls and children throw flowers at us."

It wasn't such plain sailing everywhere. As Soviet positions fell one by one, the defenders of the Brest Fortress on the German border held out despite heavy bombardment. The Germans claimed the fortress had a garrison of only a few hundred men, but there were around 7,000 soldiers. They were quickly surrounded

and besieged. An unnamed German soldier described the fighting around the fortress, located in present-day Belarus on an island in the Bug River:

"The battles on the islands extremely difficult. Complex terrain ... and the enemy is everywhere. His snipers are excellently camouflaged in the trees. ... Superb snipers! Shooting from hatches in the ground, basement windows, sewage pipes."

Slowly the Germans captured building after building. A whole month passed before the Soviet forces surrendered. The last defenders were thirsty, starving and had used up all their ammunition.

Mistreatment and killing spread

From the first day of the invasion, it was clear to the soldiers that this war would be different from what they had experienced in France and Scandinavia, for example. Civilians and soldiers would not be treated with the same consideration.

"Slowly our nerves grow accustomed to the all-too familiar gruesome images. Close to the Reds' customs house lies a large mound of fallen Russians, most of them torn to shreds from the shelling. Slaughtered civilians lie in the neighbouring house. The horribly disfigured bodies of a young woman and her two small children lie among their shattered personal belongings," recalled Hans Roth. To his wife, he noted in his diary: *"I am compelled to think of you, Rosel and Erika, when I witness such horrible images. How*

The Germans were welcomed – as here in Lviv, in Ukraine – as liberators from Communism. But their brutality soon changed the citizens' attitude.



wonderful it is that we are able to exterminate these murderous beasts. How good it is that we have pre-empted them; for in the coming weeks these bloodhounds might have been standing on German soil. ... We have taken our first prisoners – snipers and deserters receive their deserved reward.”

Crimes were also committed by the Soviets. Corporal Fritz Hübner came across the bodies of a unit of German reconnaissance troops: *“They’d had their genitals cut off while still alive, their eyes gouged out, throats cut, or ears and noses cut off.”*

After this, Hübner and his comrades responded in a similar way when taking prisoners. Therefore, even though thousands of Soviet soldiers surrendered in the first days of the invasion, many did not dare.

Red Army counter-attacked

While the Soviet forces were overwhelmed on the first day of the invasion, the following day they began to counter-attack. Hans Roth and his Panzerjäger company encountered one of the units:

“Never have we experienced anything like this: 100 Russian tanks are fighting against us. The most important thing is to keep ... calm. We eliminated four tanks in a short amount of time. Approximately 20 Stukas dive bomb, howling from the skies, to attack the Russian tank line. By the afternoon, the battle is decided to our advantage. ... More than 60 enemy tanks stand burned out or crushed.”

The picture was repeated along the entire front. The same day, the Red Army lost over 100 tanks in a battle near Pruzhany and 150 tanks the following day near Vinnytsia. All counter-attacks were repulsed and the German panzer columns continued unabated. The Luftwaffe made also heavy inroads into Soviet units, as Polish Fred Virski witnessed:

“Suddenly I saw something dark, like a shadow, crossing the grey sky. I took careful aim with my sights, pulled the trigger. ... I knew I had no chance of harming planes flying at 3,000 metres, but this firing gave me the feeling that we were not defenceless. ... Beneath us there was pandemonium. We could see men rushing off into the fields. ... For a short interval the bombing stopped. Suddenly, from above us, came a whining noise. Quickly it grew into a scream. We knew this scream – the planes were diving.”

Along with hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers, Virski moved to the front. The Red Army command ordered all available forces to mobilise. They had to slow the German advance at any cost, long enough to establish defensive positions along the rivers that cut through the western Soviet Union. But in the years leading up to the war, the army leadership had focused exclusively on an offensive war against Germany. The Red Army was not ready for a defensive conflict. In the coming weeks, it would cost the lives of tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers. ■

Despite successive victories, Germany bled

On the surface, the German Army seemed invincible, but by 1941, its foundations had begun to falter. The army lacked weapons and spare parts.

Adolf Hitler had already planned the future of German war production before Barbarossa. Once victory was assured, the German war industry would no longer build tanks and rifles, but warships and submarines. The new weapons would be used to defeat the British Royal Navy and Royal Air Force.

Hitler’s armament plan, however, was built around one key expectation: that Stalin’s forces would be quickly defeated. Indeed, the German war industry in 1941 was not built for protracted conflicts, but for short campaigns in which enemy armies were surrounded and quickly wiped out. The tactic had worked well in Poland, Scandinavia and France, and Hitler naturally expected it to work against the Soviet Union, whose army he judged inferior to the French.

Germany was so confident of its own military capabilities that it had not fully converted production to armament. Many of the factories that produced

tanks for the German Army therefore still devoted manpower and resources to building cars for civilians. This meant that the Wehrmacht did not have enough trucks, tanks, machine guns and spare parts to take advantage of the initial victories over the Soviet Union. Only in 1942, when it was apparent that the war against the Soviet Union would drag on, did production shift, but it was too late.

The German war industry was also deeply dependent on a quick victory over the Soviet Union for other reasons. Germany was short of oil. In 1938 alone, German industry consumed 44 million barrels of oil, but produced only 3.8 million barrels itself. Although it was able to make synthetic oil, total production barely reached 13 million barrels. The remaining 31 million barrels had to be imported. It was therefore necessary to capture Soviet oil fields to keep the war machine going.

Factories in Germany were not converted to war production. This proved fatal.





THE SOVIET LINE COLLAPSED

With our faces contorted by anger, we jump into the Reds' shrapnel trenches. Anti-tank grenades hammer into their fortifications. All goes crazy.

Hans Roth, German soldier.

Eastern Front, June-July 1941



All over the Eastern Front, German soldiers stormed forward during the first weeks of the invasion. The Red Army was in disarray and on the verge of collapse.

The Soviet line collapsed

German tanks stormed through the Soviet Union, leaving the Red Army in total disarray. Desperate Soviet generals tried to slow the German advance with hopeless counter-attacks, resulting in casualties in the hundreds of thousands. By July 1941, Hitler was alarmingly close to securing Nazi dominance in Europe.

By Benjamin Christensen

There was complete panic among Soviet ranks at the end of June 1941. The German invasion had caught the Red Army by surprise, and hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers were on the run all along the front. They were no match for Hitler's panzer forces, which continued their rapid advance deep into the country.

Hans Roth, a private German soldier, went victoriously from one battle to the next in those early days, making diligent notes in his diary. By 24th June, he had reached the Soviet town of Babicze in the western part of what is now Ukraine.

"Encirclement of the enemy has been achieved by dawn and continues to close in, despite the desperate attempts by the Reds to break through ... The Russians run like maniacs against our lines ... Artillery fire has been ordered, and just minutes later, scores of heavy shells hiss and howl over our heads ... The entire valley swills from the impact of the shelling. We are able to reach the first buildings in Babicze under the cover of the well positioned fire ... With our faces contorted by anger, we jump into the Reds' shrapnel trenches. Anti-tank grenades hammer into their fortifications. All goes crazy now and chaos erupts ... Resistance from the Reds has been broken—an entire Red division has been destroyed.

"Clusters of dead and wounded soldiers are blocking the street. The number of our casualties is also high. We are so exhausted we could pass out. Despite this, we reassemble and continue to advance without any noteworthy resistance."

Defence line split by 100 km gap

The Red Army's commanders were left in complete disarray. On the central front, Soviet units had been surrounded in three large pockets around the towns of Bialystok, Navahrudak and Volkovysk, which were now slowly being crushed.

Between the northern and central fronts, a gaping hole of 100 kilometres had opened up in the Soviet lines, through which German panzer forces poured towards Minsk without encountering any significant resistance. The Soviet casualty figures made frightening reading for its commanders. On average, a Soviet soldier died every two seconds. In the north, the Baltic Army was losing 5,000

men a day, and in the south, 16,000 soldiers were dying daily in Ukraine. But the worst figures of all were on the central front in Belarus, where 23,000 Soviet soldiers lost their lives day after day. In addition, entire regiments, divisions and armies disappeared, surrounded and swallowed up by the advancing German units and forced to surrender.

The Germans, for their part, found the first days of fighting to be tougher and very different from the battles the soldiers had endured in Poland and through the campaign in France. As General Hermann Hoth noted, stubborn resistance from the Russians had forced the Germans to fight more traditional battles. Having been able to take chances in Poland and in the West, the Germans now had to be more cautious.

Even German privates like Hubert Hegele of the 1st Mountain Division in Army Group South had quickly realised that this was going to be a different war:

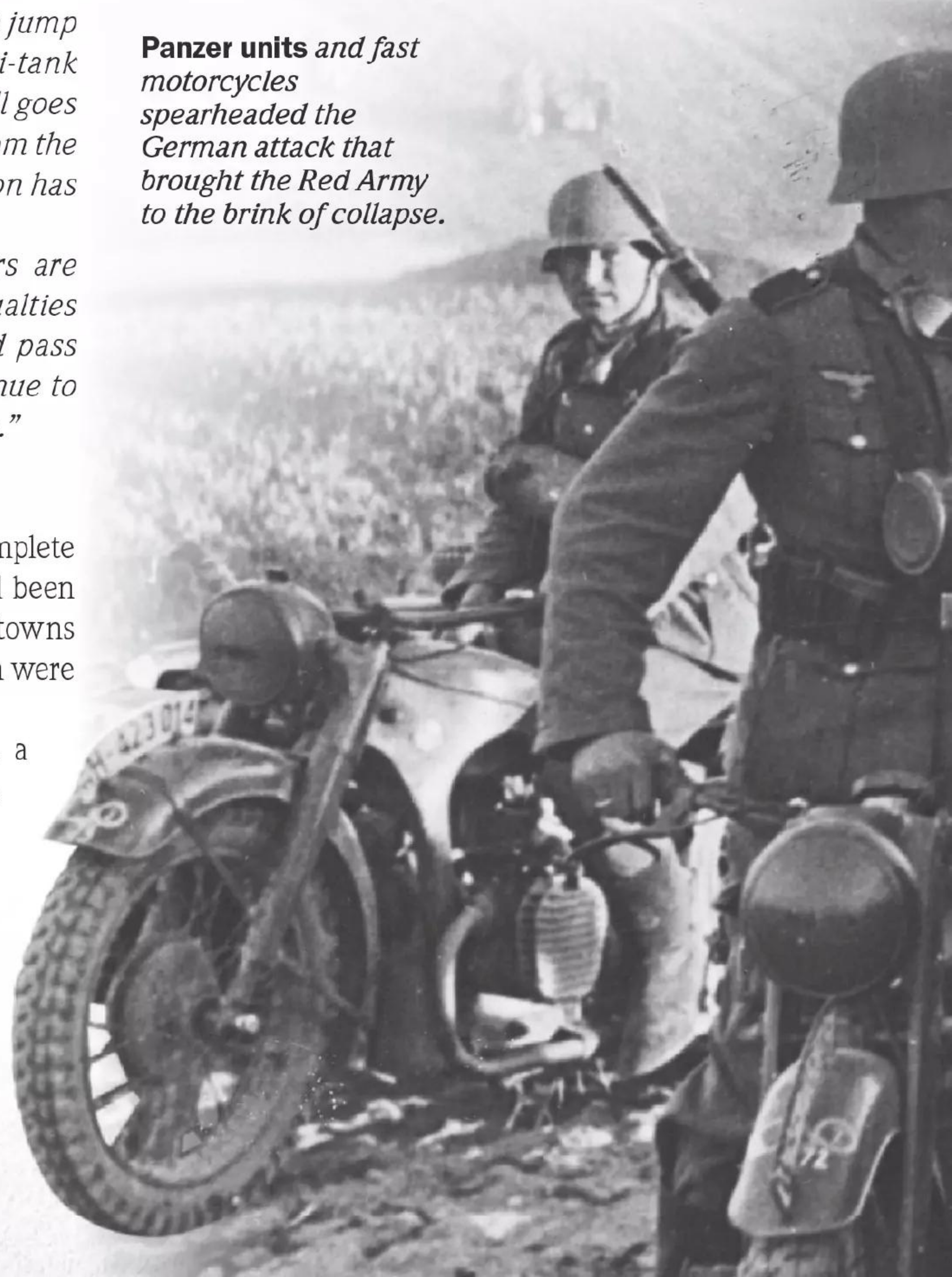
"It was difficult, more than difficult ... Will it always go on here like this? Many of our comrades

Panzer units and fast motorcycles spearheaded the German attack that brought the Red Army to the brink of collapse.

The **Stahlhelm** (Steel helmet) was produced by the millions and was standard equipment in the German army.



The helmet was designed to provide maximum protection against shrapnel.



have already been laid to rest in the burning Polish soil ... It takes me ages to fall asleep. The thoughts of the day, particularly of the horror at the castle gardens in Oleszyce, were simply too burdensome. And now a solemn stillness lies over the battlefield at the border. Above, in the cloudless night sky, there is the splendour of a million stars; on the earth, the white recognition flares of the Germans and the red flares of the Russians ... And tomorrow?"

Blitzkrieg threatened supply lines

The German units continued to advance in three directions according to plan: north through Lithuania towards Leningrad, in the centre through that 100-kilometre gap in the Soviet front line towards Minsk, and south towards the Ukrainian capital Kiev. But the deep thrusts were dangerous for the advancing troops, who often pushed forward quickly without the possibility of securing supply lines. The slow infantry had to provide this, while the motorised units pressed forward in haste, hoping to encircle and destroy as many Soviet armies as possible.

On the southern front, Private Hans Roth and his anti-tank unit had been in heavy fighting for several days. But there was no time for respite.

"What I would give to be able to sleep in! After only two hours of sleep we are back at it ... Our rapid advance in narrow wedge formation has

created a terrible situation for us: only the banks along the road are able to be cleansed of enemy troops. There is no time to comb the neighbouring forests, which is precisely, however, where the enemy combatants are reassembling. Time and time again there are small battles to the rear of the front line. Supply convoys are being attacked and obliterated by the enemy far behind our own line," Roth complained in his diary.

Roth and his comrades, however, were better off than their Soviet counterparts. Everywhere along the front the Red Army soldiers received hopeless and contradictory orders from their superiors. Joseph Stalin had ordered counter-attacks all along the front, but the units ►



German trains couldn't run in Russia

German Bernhard von Lossberg was the one of the men who drafted the military plans that underpinned Operation Barbarossa's blueprint. Of all the participants, he was the only one that took logistics into account.

Several plans for an invasion of the Soviet Union were drawn up by the Germans after the fall of France in the summer of 1940. The High Command's department responsible for military planning presented its own proposal on 19th September 1940 – a plan drawn up by Lieutenant Colonel Bernhard von Lossberg. The document has since become known as the Lossberg study.

Lossberg's plan divided the German force into three armies: two north of the Pripyat Marshes and one south. Unlike many of the

other officers who planned the invasion of the Soviet Union, Lieutenant Colonel Lossberg's planning accounted for the poor quality of the Soviet road and rail networks. Lossberg noted in his draft, for example, that "all German operations must be supported in their later stages by reliable Russian railways, because in the vast spaces a transport system based only on roads will be insufficient".

The problem for Lossberg and the German invasion plan was that the Soviet railways had a broader track gauge than Western European railways. German supply trains

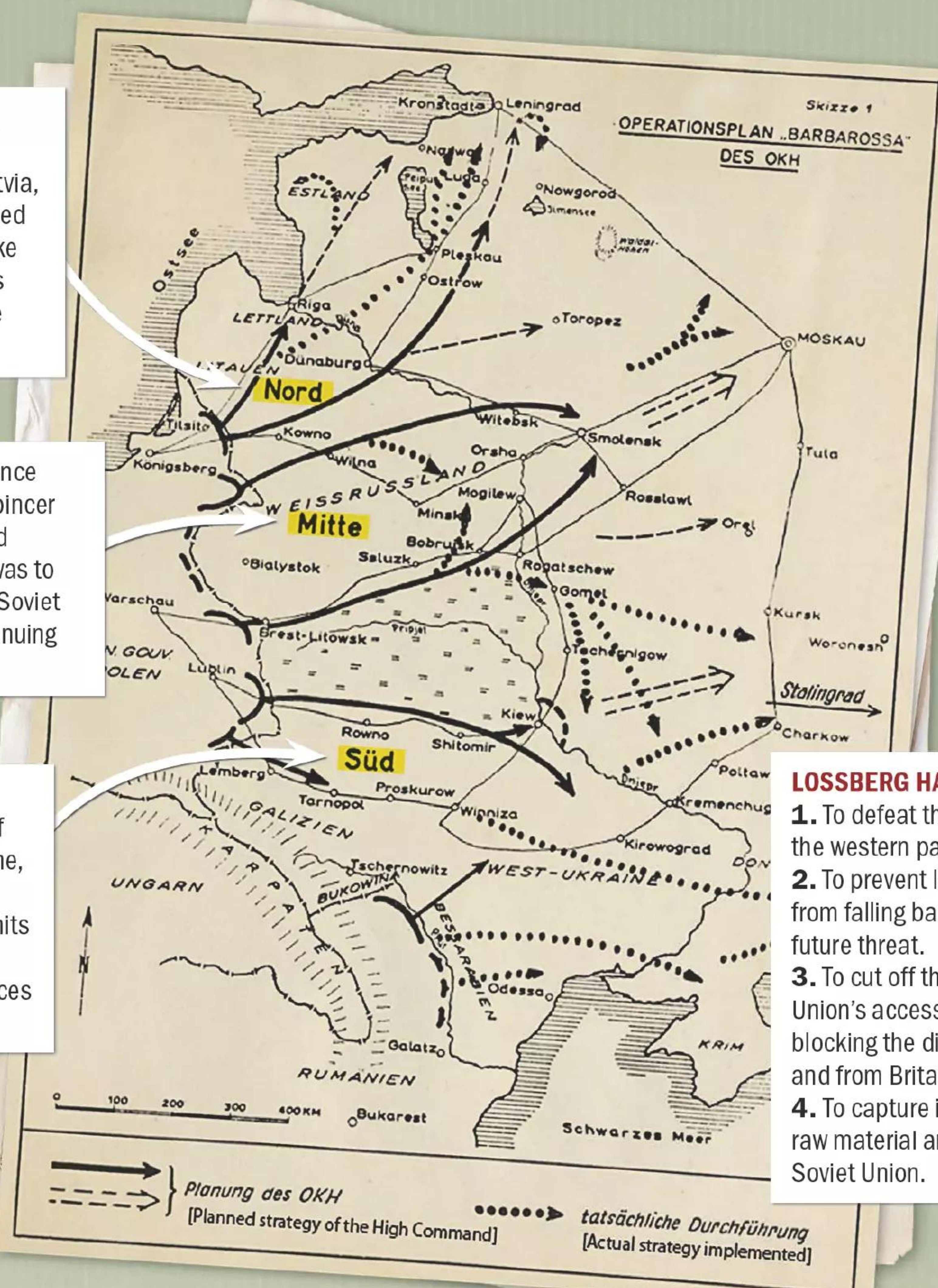
could therefore not run directly on Soviet railway lines.

Lossberg saw only two solutions to the challenge: one was to capture enough Soviet trains to transport materiel. The other was to rebuild the Soviet rail network to accommodate Western European trains. The first solution, however, was complicated by the fact that to ensure victory over the Red Army it would be necessary to bomb the trains before they brought Soviet reinforcements to the front, while the second solution would take an inordinately long time.

According to Lossberg's plan, **ONE ARMY** would advance through Lithuania towards Latvia, while part of the force bypassed Latvia and Estonia east of Lake Peipus in order to surround as many Soviet units as possible and reach Leningrad.

ANOTHER ARMY was to advance through Belarus in two great pincer manoeuvres, to be assembled around Smolensk. Their aim was to encircle and crush as large a Soviet force as possible before continuing on to Moscow.

THE THIRD ARMY would advance into Ukraine south of the Pripyat Marshes. In Ukraine, the force was tasked with defeating the strong Soviet units defending the Soviet Union's granary to secure vital resources for further warfare.



LOSSBERG HAD FOUR AIMS:

1. To defeat the main enemy force in the western part of the Soviet Union.
2. To prevent larger enemy forces from falling back and thus posing a future threat.
3. To cut off the western Soviet Union's access to the sea, thus blocking the direct supply routes to and from Britain and the US.
4. To capture important industrial and raw material areas in the western Soviet Union.

that were to carry out the attacks were either surrounded or lacked artillery and air support. It was complete chaos. Some units, for example, had been ordered both to attack and to hold their positions. Officers, fearing for their lives if they did not follow Stalin's orders, ordered desperate counter-attacks that cost thousands of soldiers their lives.

Despite heavy losses, General Ryabyshev's VIII Mechanised Corps was one of the few units to recapture some lost ground on the southern front. But the next morning counter-orders came from the top, and the corps had to give up their dearly bought territory. Later in the day another counter-order came, and the counter-attack was now to be resumed. But Ryabyshev's units were exhausted and unable to mount another assault. The situation prompted the Political Commissar of the Southern Front, Nikolai Vashugin, to troop to the general's headquarters:

"How much did you sell yourself for, Judas?"

Ryabyshev tried to explain, but was interrupted:

"You will be heard by military tribunal, traitor. Right here, under this fir, we'll hear you out, and right here we'll shoot you."

The general recounted in a trembling voice how his units had first captured land through hard fighting, which they had then been ordered to abandon, and that most of his force now had to be reorganised before they could attack again. A counter-attack could not be launched until the following morning, he argued.

"You have 20 minutes to report your decision," hissed the political commissar in response before giving Ryabyshev his choice: launch an immediate offensive or be court-martialled.

Fearing for his life, Ryabyshev agreed to send a few units to counter-attack the enemy near the town of Dubno. To this Commissar Vashugin dryly remarked:

"If you take Dubno by evening, you'll get a medal. If you don't, you'll be expelled from the Party and shot."

Against all odds, Ryabyshev's exhausted units managed to capture the city – only to be later surrounded and destroyed. Even to a fanatical commissar like Vashugin, it was obvious that the situation was hopeless. He went to his superior, the future Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and told him that the Soviet Union would soon fall and that he would shoot himself. Khrushchev replied icily:

"Why are you talking foolishness? If you've decided to shoot yourself, what are you waiting for?"

Vashugin then immediately drew his pistol and shot himself. The commissar was far from alone in choosing this option during the early days of the invasion. Masses of soldiers chose to wound themselves in desperation. Soviet correspondent Vasily Grossman, for example, recalled *"how happy and excited are the faces of wounded soldiers when they return from the battle"*, to which a divisional



The Red Army fled from the Germans all along the front line. Even soldiers who had entrenched themselves could not hold out.

commander replied *"with a sardonic grin, 'Especially the faces of those wounded in the left hand.'"*

The Soviet security service NKVD responded by executing soldiers with such injuries on the spot. Compassionate military doctors found themselves forced to amputate the entire arms of soldiers with self-inflicted wounds before the injuries could be checked by the security services.

Soviet soldiers were sacrificed

For the Soviet High Command it was a question of slowing down the German advance at any cost. The Red Army desperately needed to buy time to mobilise and organise its defences into two major lines before it was overrun. Machines and other equipment from the large industrial areas in the west were hastily packed up and sent by train to the east, where the machines could be reassembled and production resumed. But that took time – time that had to be won by sacrificing tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers' lives in hopeless suicide missions all along the front.

Soviet journalist Konstantin Simonov was at the front in the early days, reporting eagerly for both Soviet and foreign newspapers. In one of his articles, he commented on the wording used by Soviet propaganda.

"Our covering forces, moving into counter-attack, detain the enemy until our main forces can arrive.' We have often read this modest, business-like phrase in reports from the Informburo," Simonov explained. *"But not everyone has a clear▶*

FACTS

For Operation Barbarossa, the Germans were helped by a large contingent of Finns and Romanians. **Up to 500,000 Finns** took part in the invasion of the Soviet Union, while the **Romanians were able to muster around 365,000.**

Motorcycles travelled swiftly, giving the German forces greater mobility than the Red Army. But when winter came, that advantage fell away.

idea of what is hidden by that phrase, what bravery and iron fortitude stand behind the simple words ‘detain the enemy until our main forces can arrive’. Military language is laconic. The order says ‘detain the enemy’. But in our army ‘detain’ means ‘detain at any cost’. The word ‘fight’ in our army means ‘fight until your last drop of blood’.

“Covering forces are those units that take the enemy’s first blow, that first feel out his strategy and tactics, that first discover new methods of fighting

him, learning as they go, in combat. They detain the enemy, they make mistakes that often cost dearly, they correct those mistakes and accrue new combat experience which today and tomorrow will be used by the whole army to destroy the enemy.”

Communication failed

The situation was also hopeless for the Soviet pilots in the air, who took up the fight in obsolete aircraft against a powerful – if numerically smaller –



If you've decided to shoot yourself,
what are you waiting for? ■ Nikita Khrushchev, future leader of the Soviet Union.

Luftwaffe. In desperation at the inferiority of their aircraft, Soviet pilots had begun targeting German aircraft with their own planes in suicidal attacks rather than attempting to shoot them down. In the first weeks of the invasion alone, 358 aerial torpedo attacks took place.

At the same time, most lines of communication had been destroyed by saboteurs and bombs during the first days of the invasion, and the generals had completely lost contact with the units at the front. And

even where there was contact, the information coming from the front wasn't always trusted. For example, when the 11th Soviet Army under General Vasily Morozov was surrounded in Lithuania, Morozov sent telegram after telegram to his superior, General Fyodor Kuznetsov, who was located 500 km away from the front in the city of Pskov. After receiving the increasingly desperate telegrams, General Kuznetsov turned to an army veteran of four wars:

"What do you think?" the general asked.

"The army is in a tough situation," the veteran replied. *"They are encircled..."*

"You haven't understood a thing!" Kuznetsov yelled. *"Can a disciplined and tactful person like Morozov be sending me rude cables like that?"*

"He might, if the circumstances forced him," the veteran replied diplomatically, but General Kuznetsov had already made up his mind.

"Morozov would not write this way. These cables are from the Germans. The Eleventh's staff must have been captured."

The general refused to help the 11th Army and the thousands of soldiers caught in the Germans' trap. The army was thus condemned to destruction.

Things worsened in the weeks ahead, as Finland threw herself into the fight against the Soviet Union in the hope of reclaiming territory lost during the Winter War. Here it proved little consolation to Stalin that the Finns had no desire to regain more than what they had lost. Finland was not Germany's ally, according to its commander-in-chief Marshal Mannerheim, but merely Hitler's *"fellow traveller in a war which Finland is waging for its own active defence"*.

Disaster in Belarus

One of the first major targets for the Germans was the Belarusian capital, Minsk. Stalin had insisted on defending the city, even though it had no particular military importance, resulting in 700,000 troops being assigned to defend the city.

In Belarus, the Red Army also possessed a large armoured force of nearly 1,000 tanks, including many of the new KV-1 and T-34 tanks, which were superior to most German tanks. When word came that a large German armoured force was assembling near Grodno, 250 km west of Minsk, the tank force was immediately sent there, but the order led to disaster. Hundreds of tanks did not even reach the front but had to be left in ditches because they ran out of fuel due to German air raids wiping out many of the Soviet supply depots.

By the end of June 1941, the Germans had completely surrounded hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers in a pocket around Minsk. Although many thousands of Soviet soldiers managed to escape, the closure of the Minsk pocket was a disaster for the Red Army. The fighting in Belarus alone in the first weeks of Operation Barbarossa had now cost the ►



STRENGTH RATIO

German superiority was clearly demonstrated in the Battle of Minsk in Belarus where, over the course of just 17 days, the Red Army lost up to

420,000

men. By comparison, the Germans lost only about

12,000
soldiers.



MEDIUM TANK

Panzer III

The blitzkrieg's armoured workhorse

The Panzer III was in the vanguard as Germany unleashed its feared blitzkrieg on the battlefield. The tank was designed to fight both infantry and tanks, which represented a whole new way of thinking about warfare.

In 1934, Hitler ordered the German war industry to develop a new type of tank that could break through enemy lines and penetrate deep behind the front line. The tank would be capable of fighting both infantry and enemy tanks. The answer was the Panzer III,

which became the workhorse of the German armoured forces for much of the war.

Using tanks to fight other tanks was a completely new idea. Until now, this task had been left to specialist units armed with anti-tank guns and anti-tank rifles. The Panzer III

was used from the beginning of the war until the final battles in many different places and in many different ways. From the frozen swamps of the Soviet Union to the scorching desert of North Africa, the Panzer III was a permanent fixture in the German war effort.

AWKWARD TO REPAIR:

If the gear system of the Panzer III was damaged, the turret and the top of the chassis had to be separated from the rest of the tank before the gear system could be lifted out with a large crane, a difficult task in the field.

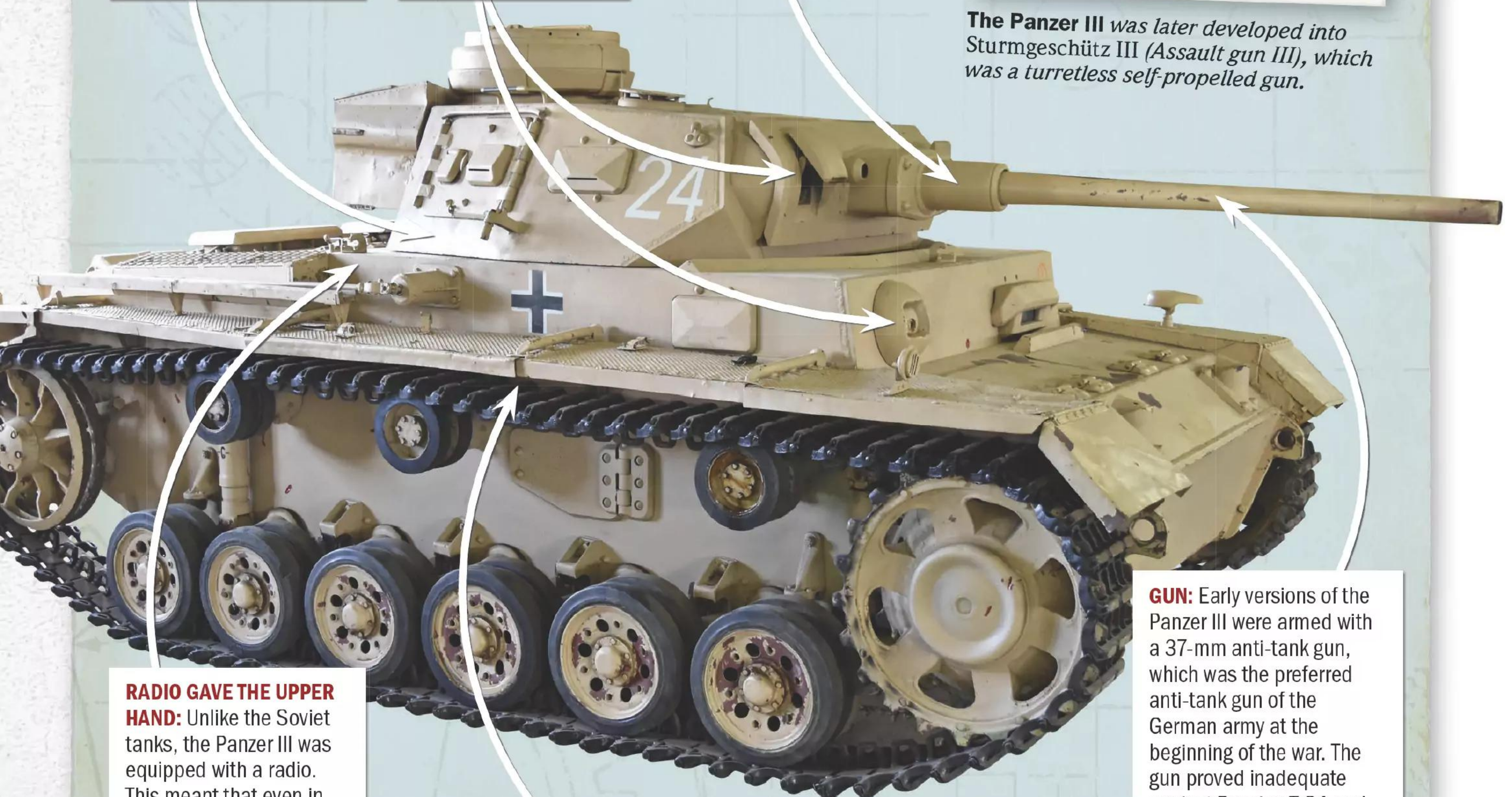
MACHINE GUNS:

In addition to the main gun, the Panzer III carried 2-3 machine guns. One mounted in the chassis, one in the turret and in some cases a third mounted on top of the turret for firing at enemy aircraft.

FLAMETHROWER: In some versions of the Panzer III the main gun was replaced by a flamethrower, used against fortified positions such as bunkers and machine gun emplacements.



The Panzer III was later developed into Sturmgeschütz III (Assault gun III), which was a turretless self-propelled gun.



RADIO GAVE THE UPPER

HAND: Unlike the Soviet tanks, the Panzer III was equipped with a radio. This meant that even in the heat of battle, commanders could coordinate their units' efforts on the battlefield.

PANZER III WAS WELDED TOGETHER: The Panzer III was one of the first tanks to be welded rather than riveted together. Welding meant less weight as there was no need for a frame to rivet the armour plates to.

GUN: Early versions of the Panzer III were armed with a 37-mm anti-tank gun, which was the preferred anti-tank gun of the German army at the beginning of the war. The gun proved inadequate against Russian T-34 and KV-1 tanks. Later, the Panzer III was upgraded with a 50-mm gun.

It seems like the fighting in the East will be over in four to six weeks. ■ Adolf B, German physician.



Soviet Union 420,000 troops, nearly 5,000 tanks, 10,000 guns and heavy mortars, and over 1,600 aircraft. By comparison, the attacking Germans had suffered only a fraction of those losses.

The Germans approached Moscow

In early July, German forces approached Smolensk on the direct route to Moscow. All the Germans had to do now was cross the Dnieper River. They did not expect much resistance, as they had taken so many prisoners around Minsk. It therefore came as a surprise to everyone when a pilot returned from a reconnaissance mission with the following message:

“Strong enemy armoured columns with at least 100 heavy tanks advancing along both sides of Borisov-Orsha-Smolensk road in the area of Orsha. Among them very heavy, hitherto unobserved models.”

“Where do they come from? These Russians seem to have nine lives.” a German general asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

An unnamed German soldier noted in his war diary the several days of armoured combat that followed:

“Russian tank attack on the near side of Tolochino. One of their tanks got stuck in the forest. Sergeant Findeisen with men of 6th and 7th Companies finished it off with close-combat weapons. Ten T-26s

appeared in front of our lines, on the motor highway. Second Lieutenant Isenbeck, leading a Panzerjäger platoon, blocked the road with a 5-cm anti-tank gun. The Russian tanks were advancing well spaced out. Isenbeck knelt by his gun, firing shell after shell. The leading T-26 was on fire. The second slewed into the roadside ditch. The third one, its track shot to pieces, stood motionless by the side of the road, a sitting duck. Change of target. Fire! Five more tanks were knocked out. The ninth was hit just below its turret at 30 yards’ range and was now blazing like a torch. The tenth, behind it, was able to turn and get away by zigzagging wildly.”

From the other side of the front, Soviet General Andry Yeryomenko recounted his soldiers’ reaction to the initial attacks by the German panzer forces.

“The Germans attacked with large armoured formations, often with infantrymen riding on the tanks. Our infantry were not prepared for that. At the shout ‘Enemy tanks!’ our companies, battalions, and even entire regiments scuttled to and fro ... They lost their ability to manoeuvre, their combat readiness was diminished, and all operational control, contact, and cooperation were rendered impossible,”

Although the German panzer forces were superior and the Soviet units surrendered in quick ►

Prisoners of war.
Over five million Soviet soldiers forced to surrender to the German superpower.

The shocking roads, the heat, and the dust were more dangerous enemies than the Red Army. ■ Heinz Guderian, German general.



succession, the Germans encountered surprises. The German commanders had expected weak resistance from the Soviet armoured units, which they believed were equipped with obsolete tanks.

They were therefore completely unprepared when their units ran into the new T-34 tanks. Developed under the strictest secrecy, these state-of-the-art tanks were the first to feature sloping armour, giving the vehicles good protection and a low silhouette, making them hard to both see and hit. In addition, the tanks were lightning fast and their wide belts were perfectly designed for driving over the Russian terrain's varying surfaces of deep mud, loose gravel and rocks.

Early in the morning of 8th July 1941, units of the 17th Panzer Division encountered the new Soviet tanks for the first time near Senno. All day long the two tank forces fired at each other, and the battlefield was strewn with burning tanks.

At about 17.00 all German units received word that they were to conserve ammunition, but at the same moment, Westphal, a German radio operator aboard one of the tanks heard his officer shouting a warning:

"Heavy enemy tank! Turret 10 o'clock. Armour-piercing shell. Fire!"

The tank's gunner fired the gun, and seconds later the message followed:

"Direct hit!"

Nevertheless, the Soviet T-34 tank continued unabated. Even when Westphal's tank fired at its sides, where the tank's armour was much thinner, it failed to inflict significant damage. The shots simply bounced off. Only when the Soviet tank got stuck in a small bog, and heavy German artillery could fire on it, was it finally put out of action.

Fortunately for the German tank commanders, their Soviet opponents still used the T-34 tanks poorly in the summer of 1941. They were mostly deployed in small groups that were quickly overwhelmed by concentrated German firepower. In addition, few Soviet tanks had radios, and crews had to

communicate with flags, while German tanks had internal radio systems, allowing units to work closely together while the enemy fought almost blindly.

The Germans crossed the Dnieper

Although the first weeks of fighting had been hard, the German soldiers' courage was still high, as a letter from field medic Adolf B testified:

"It seems like the fighting in the East will be over in four to six weeks. Like many of my comrades and acquaintances, I would be delighted if our division were then allowed to return to Germany. And then never again to Russia! ... We've already advanced farther east than any other unit ... We've already passed by many German settlements (former Frisians and Dutch) ... Tomorrow will be my third birthday in the field."

For several days, General Guderian and his armoured forces had stood on the banks of the Dnieper waiting for permission to cross. But his superiors would not sign off until the infantry had caught up with the tanks to support the attack. In despair, the general asked his chief of staff:

"What's your opinion, Liebenstein? Shall we continue our thrust and force the Dnieper with armour alone, or do we have to wait for the infantry divisions to catch up with us?"

Guderian wanted to cross the river immediately but was refused. Soon after, he made a desperate phone call to his superiors, shouting into the receiver:

"You're throwing away our victory!"

Finally, on the evening of 9th July, the general received the green light, and the next morning he crossed the river. Within a few days he'd surrounded ►



Soviet resistance was far fiercer than that previously encountered in France and Poland by the Germans. Nevertheless, they succeeded in advancing.



The most important objective to be achieved before the onset of winter is not the capture of Moscow but the seizure of the Crimea. ■ Adolf Hitler.



Fierce urban warfare, in which the defenders were willing to sacrifice everything, was one of the major challenges facing the German invasion forces on the Eastern Front.

the large city of Smolensk and cut off a direct line to Moscow for the 15 Soviet divisions defending the city. Another huge pocket of Soviet troops was crushed before the end of July. 760,000 Soviet soldiers were either killed, wounded or captured, and over 3,000 tanks, 900 aircraft and 3,000 guns were destroyed. Most importantly for the Germans, the road to Moscow was now wide open. There were no longer any great rivers blocking the way. Moscow was ready to fall. Army Group Centre just awaited the Führer's approval to launch the final, decisive push against the Soviet capital.

The tanks were worn down

Before the attack could begin, however, the German army had to rest. Several weeks of fighting had taken their toll on the German soldiers and their equipment, as General Schaal noted:

"The shocking roads, the heat, and the dust were more dangerous enemies than the Red Army. The tanks were enveloped in thick clouds of dust. The dust and grit wore out the engines. The filters were continually clogged up with dirt. Oil-consumption

became too heavy for supplies to cope with. Engines got overheated and pitons seized up. In this manner the 10th Panzer Division lost the bulk of its heavy Mark IV tanks on the way to Yelnya.

"The men of the maintenance units and engineer officers worked like Trojans. But they were short of spares. And the spares did not arrive because... the distances from the army stores had become too great. Every single ammunition or supply convoy lost about a third of its vehicles en route, either through breakdown or through enemy ambushes. Not only the machines but the men too were overtaxed. It would happen, for instance, that parts of a column on the march failed to move off again after a short rest because its officers and men had dropped off into a comatose sleep."

Despite difficult conditions and hard fighting, the German army had achieved most of its objectives for the first part of the invasion. The Germans had crushed the Soviet armies in the west before they could retreat to safety, and their armies were now ready to march on Moscow and capture the Soviet capital before winter set in. On the evening of 21st August 1941, word finally

reached the senior commanders of Army Group Centre who were waiting the order to advance on Moscow. They were surprised to receive a different message from Hitler: *"The most important objective to be achieved before the onset of winter is not the capture of Moscow but the seizure of the Crimea."*

The generals were shocked.

"What can we do against this decision?" Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, Army Group Centre's commander, asked. The head of the German Army High Command, Franz Halder, was present, but could only shake his head and confirm: *"It is immutable."*

The well-liked Colonel General Heinz Guderian was shocked by the Führer's decision:

"We've got to upset it. If we head for Kiev first we shall inevitably get involved in a winter campaign before we can reach Moscow. What the roads and our supply difficulties will be like then I shudder to think. I doubt that our tanks are up to the strain. My Panzer corps, especially XXIV Corps, have not had a single day's rest since the beginning of the campaign."

Hitler stood firm on his decision

Before long, Guderian had flown to Hitler, where he presented his thoughts directly to the Führer:

"Moscow cannot be compared with Paris or Warsaw, my Führer. Moscow is not only the head and the heart of the Soviet Union. It is also its communications centre, its political brain, an important industrial area, and above all it is the hub of the transport system of the whole Red empire. The fall of Moscow will decide the war. Stalin knows this. He knows that the fall of Moscow would mean his final defeat. And because he knows this he will employ his entire military strength before Moscow ... Once we have defeated the enemy's main forces before Moscow and in Moscow, and once we have eliminated the Soviet Union's main marshalling yard, the Baltic area and the Ukrainian industrial region will fall to us much more readily."

In a razor-sharp voice Hitler replied:

"We need the grain of the Ukraine. The industrial area of the Donets must work for us, instead of for Stalin. The Russian oil-supplies from the Caucasus must be cut off, so that his military strength withers away. Above all, we must gain control of the Crimea in order to eliminate this dangerous aircraft carrier operating against the Romanian oilfields."

The generals' arguments were to no avail – the Führer had made up his mind. The attack would continue against Ukraine and Kiev. Only then could the focus return to Moscow, whose defenders would now have all the time they needed to prepare their positions. Guderian knew that the task now facing the German army had suddenly become far more difficult, if not downright impossible. ■

NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



The Philadelphia Inquirer

14th July 1941

Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev Doomed, Nazis Say

Reds Claim Victories, Admit 250,000 losses.

MOSCOW: Buoyed by a new mutual assistance pact with Great Britain, the Soviet Union today announced a series of gigantic all-day battles with the German invaders in the Pskov, Vitebsk and Novograd Volynski areas – the distant approaches to Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev.

Reporting that in the Sunday-long fighting the Germans had lost new masses of men and materiel, the Soviet Information Bureau declared:

"In three weeks of heavy fighting the Germans have lost more than 1,000,000 men killed and wounded, while the Soviet forces have lost not more than 250,000."

Heavy tank losses

The Germans have lost more than 2,300 aircraft and over 3,000 tanks, the communiqué said, and the Russians 2,200 tanks and 1,900 planes. German planes destroyed Saturday totalled 131, it said.

Vitebsk is about 300 miles west of Moscow; Pskov is at the southern tip of Lake Peipus 150 miles south-west of Leningrad; and Novograd Volynski is 120 miles west of Kiev in the Ukraine.

All up and down the front the Russian communiqué told of a day of bitter fighting, mentioning particularly that in the north-west –

the Leningrad defence area – troops under Marshal Klementi Voroshilov checked the Germans and by staunch resistance repulsed them with heavy losses at some points.

Some panzer units reported 60 miles beyond Stalin Line

BERLIN: The fall of Leningrad and Kiev, second and third cities in Russia, is "imminent" and Moscow lies unprotected in the path of the German war machine ... the official DNB agency boasted tonight.

"Moscow is now as vulnerable as Paris was last year when Weygand's line was broken," a spokesman said. The smashing of the Stalin Line of steel and concrete "now assures a complete victory of German arms in the east", DNB said.

The agency's account pictured a collapse of Russian resistance and an impending catastrophe crushing Russia's vast armed forces and yielding Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev to Adolf Hitler.

100 miles from Leningrad

Leningrad ... is "immediately threatened" by German Panzer forces pressing upon it from the south ... according to Nazi reports. The Ukrainian capital of Kiev, once the capital of all Russia, is expected to be "occupied imminently" by German forces which have struck eastward... and "close before" Kiev, it was stated.

The Soviet Union desperately tried to trick the world into believing that the Germans were exaggerating the Red Army's casualty figures.



How German logistics worked

WAR MACHINE was insatiable

Supplying more than three million men across a 3,000-km front was a huge task that the German logistical corps struggled to solve.

As Operation Barbarossa began, the German general staff looked hopefully to the huge logistics corps responsible for supplying advancing armies with everything from hand soap to new gearboxes for tanks. The task of supplying more than 3.5 million troops advancing into the Soviet Union in June 1941 was enormous. Across a front almost 3,000 km wide, panzer divisions advanced at unprecedented speed, and their insatiable need for fuel and spare parts demanded that all logistics of the operation were worked out to the last detail. At the same time, ordinary soldiers advancing by truck, bicycle and on foot required enormous quantities of supplies: food was essential, of course, as was ammunition, but razor blades, different types of camouflaged uniforms, soap, cigarettes, mail and a myriad of other items also had to be transported quickly to the front line, which on some days advanced by 100 km.

A single logistics corps could be responsible for supplying troops along a front line several kilometres wide, and trucks carrying supplies therefore drove at regular speed from large depots further from the front to smaller depots near the battalions they were to supply.

The sheer distances and numbers of soldiers made the logistics operation unlike anything the German army had attempted before. On top of that, the Russian railroad tracks were wider than the German ones, so rail transport was difficult, while dust from the poor Soviet roads quickly proved damaging, especially to vehicle gearboxes. Later came autumn and the swampy terrain, which not only slowed the German advance, but also made the task of the supply troops even more difficult. The fact that the German troops were nevertheless, for the most, part relatively well supplied right up to December 1941 testifies to the efficiency and skill with which the German logistical corps operated.

A German soldier usually carried *Halbieserne* (iron rations) with **300 grams** of tinned food and 150 g of hard bread.

Daily consumption at rest

- The German army comprised infantry and armoured divisions with different supply needs. The infantry divisions were the largest and required the most supplies, and even when they were stationary at the front, each of the divisions still needed as much as 80 tonnes (t) of supplies every single day.

- **17,200 men**
- **80 t supplies**



- **14,373 men**
- **30 t supplies**



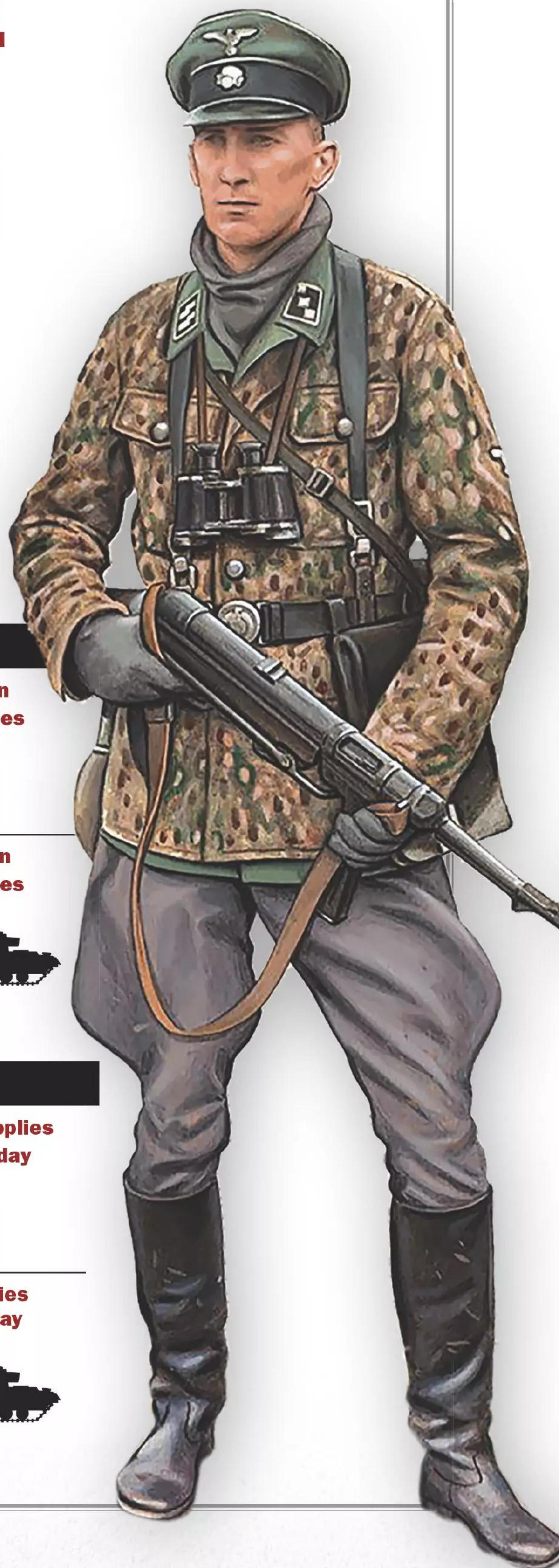
Daily consumption in battle

- The panzer divisions were more difficult to keep supplied despite their lower consumption. The reason was that they started the day in one place and by the end of the day could be more than 30 kilometres away, forcing supply troops to deliver tonnes of food and supplies over ever-growing distances.

- **1,100 t supplies**
- **10 km per day**



- **700 t supplies**
- **30 km per day**



FACTORIES

worked around the clock

German factories worked at full speed to produce goods for the soldiers at the front. Most of the equipment was produced in the Third Reich and had to be transported long distances to the Soviet Union.

One of the largest German war production sites was at the concentration camp at **Auschwitz, Poland.**

Factories

1 In 1941, war production took place in factories in the Third Reich and in concentration camps that used forced labour.

Goods produced

- Ammunition
- Soap
- Uniforms
- Razor blades
- Tinned food
- Bandages
- Medicine
- Cigarettes



War Depot

Transport within the Third Reich was by truck, and the first leg to the front was by rail.

2 The goods were then collected in a war depot, safely located within the Third Reich's borders. From there, transport to the front began.

Forward Depot

3 The supplies then reached forward depots, which were close to the railway network and at the same time close to the front, but still far enough away to be safe.



Despite a sustained effort, the logistics companies could not keep the panzer divisions fully supplied with fuel.

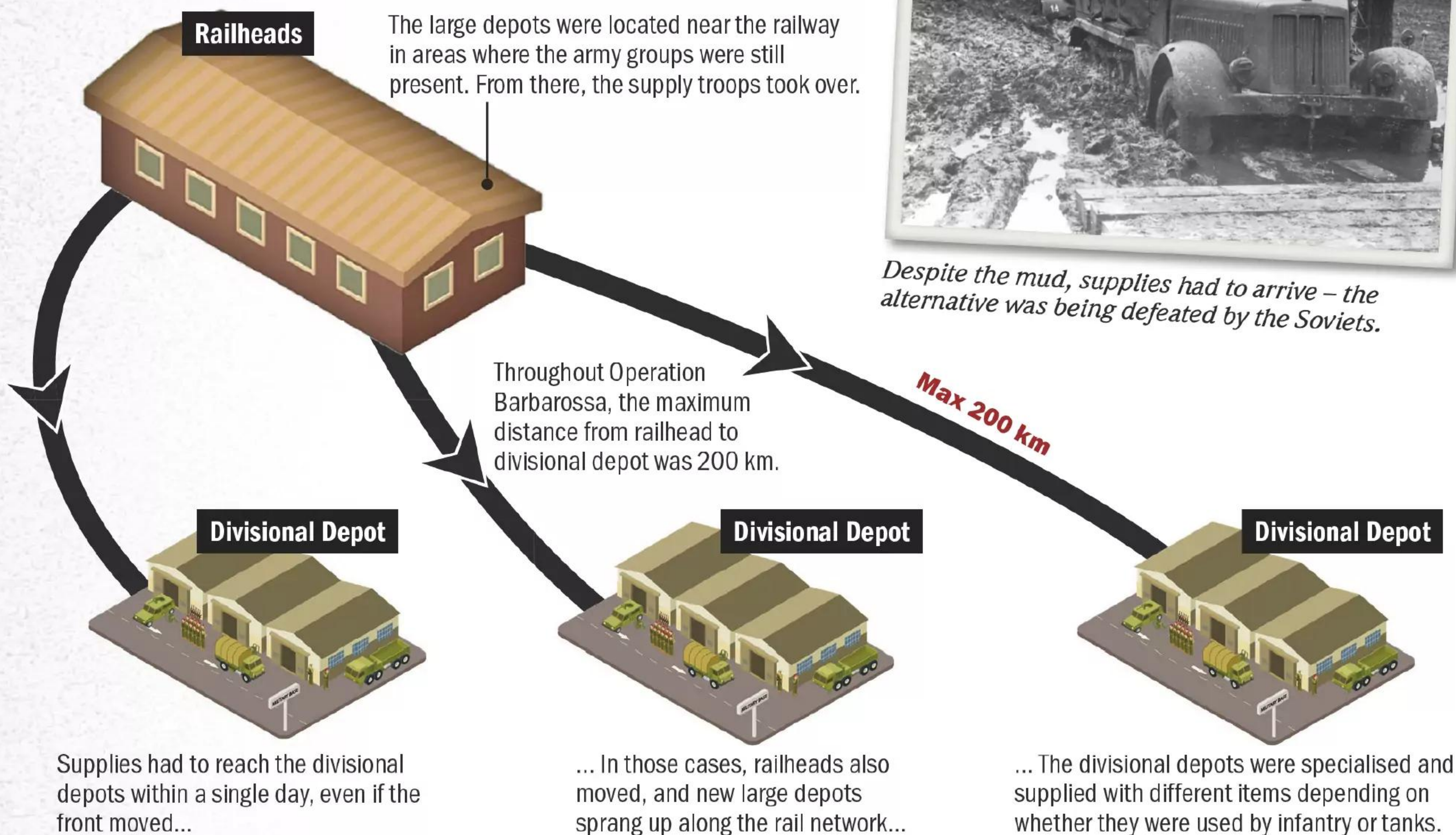
SUPPLY TRUCKS

coped with the muddy roads

Supplies were collected in large depots in the area where the rear of the army groups were located, and then sent by truck to the front line and the combat areas.



Despite the mud, supplies had to arrive – the alternative was being defeated by the Soviets.



Opel Blitz was the Germans' packhorse

Around
130,000
Opel Blitz trucks were produced during the war. Production died out in 1944 when the Allies bombed German factories.

The Opel Blitz was solid and reliable, but like all vehicles on the Eastern Front, it often got stuck in mud.



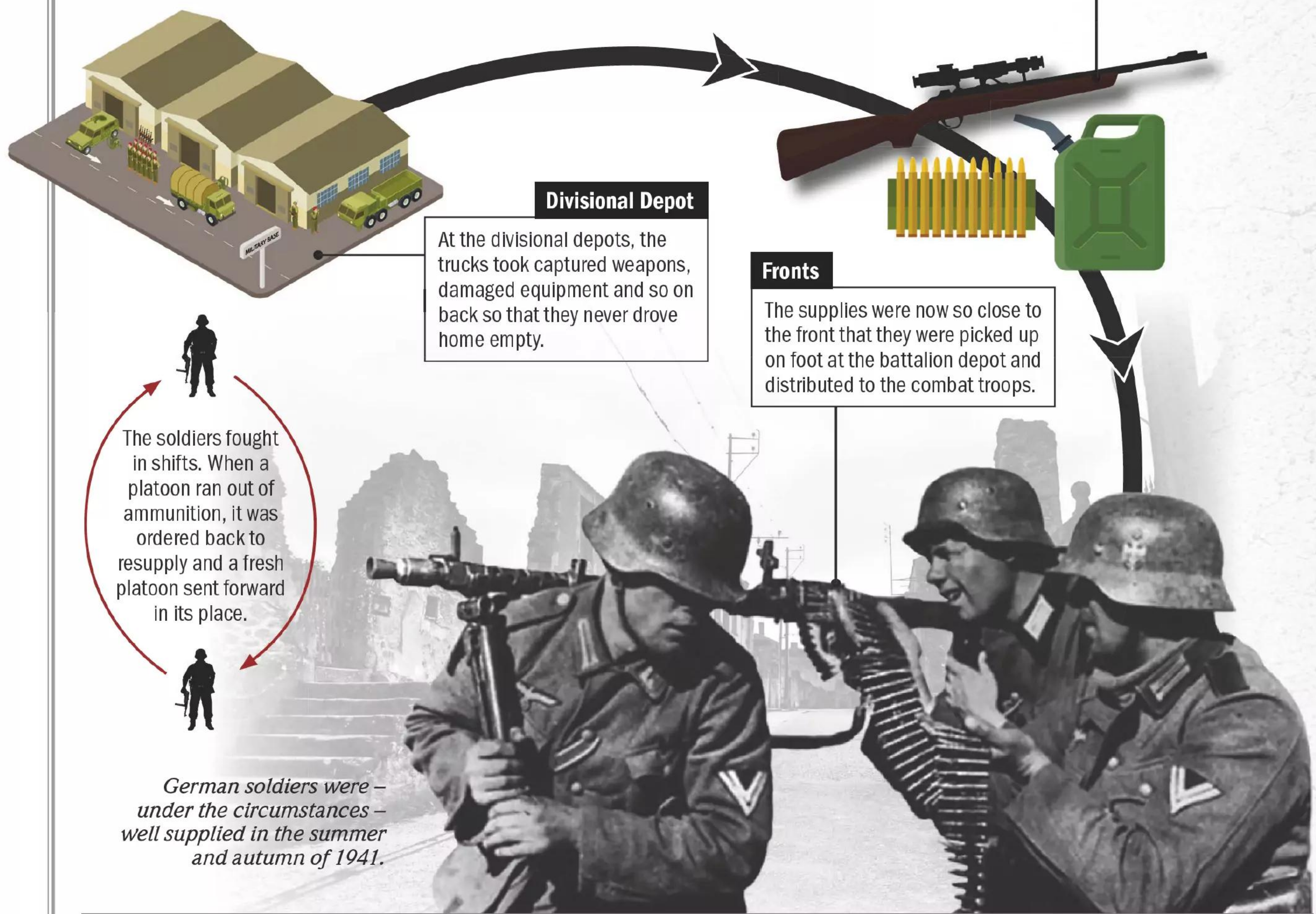
The Opel Blitz truck was a two-tonne vehicle. It could travel 405 km on a single tank of diesel, meaning supply depots had to be within 200km, so that the trucks could complete a return trip without refuelling.

With a top speed of 80 km/h the trip could be completed in five hours – on good terrain. In reality, drivers often drove for an entire day without rest.

SOLDIERS

did the rest

From the divisional depots, supplies had only a short way to travel to the front. The aim was for German soldiers to be fully supplied with ammunition at all times while fighting, so battles were often fought in shifts.



Germans broke all records

Although the Barbarossa campaign was probably lost due to lack of supplies, the German logistics companies actually worked extremely efficiently and managed, under extremely difficult circumstances, to supply troops much faster than both the Soviets and the Americans. In the battle for the Minsk pocket in June 1941, for example, two

panzer divisions advanced as much as 300 km in seven days, more than 40 km a day. The advance was only possible with good supplies of fuel and ammunition. By comparison, as late as 1944, US troops were required to advance a maximum of 75 km in five days, or an average of 15 km a day, to allow the supply troops to keep up.

DAILY SUPPLY RANGE

• Germany		200 km
• USA		15 km
• USSR		100 km

“At Leningrad there were only 437 of us left”

By Jens Jørgen Nielsen

Aged just 17, Semen Chtipelman enlisted in the Red Army in 1940. The following year he stood at Leningrad and endured hunger, frost and death to help stop the German onslaught on the city. He was one of only a few from his unit to survive the fighting and see the war through to its bitter end.

Can you tell us a little about yourself? What were you doing before the war and how did you become part of the Red Army?

I come from a small Jewish shtetl (small town) in south-western Ukraine. I grew up in a poor Jewish family; my father was a shoemaker. For a few years just before the war, I went to a boarding school about 12 km from home.

I was only home on weekends. Then I worked in an ordinary factory until I was drafted into the Red Army in 1940. I was immediately sent to Estonia just before the referendum on Estonian incorporation into the Soviet Union that year. My first tasks were to secure Estonia against ‘provocations’. Inclusion into the Soviet Union was a controversial issue, and not all Estonians were happy with the outcome.

I was a cadet in the 72nd Light Artillery Regiment and

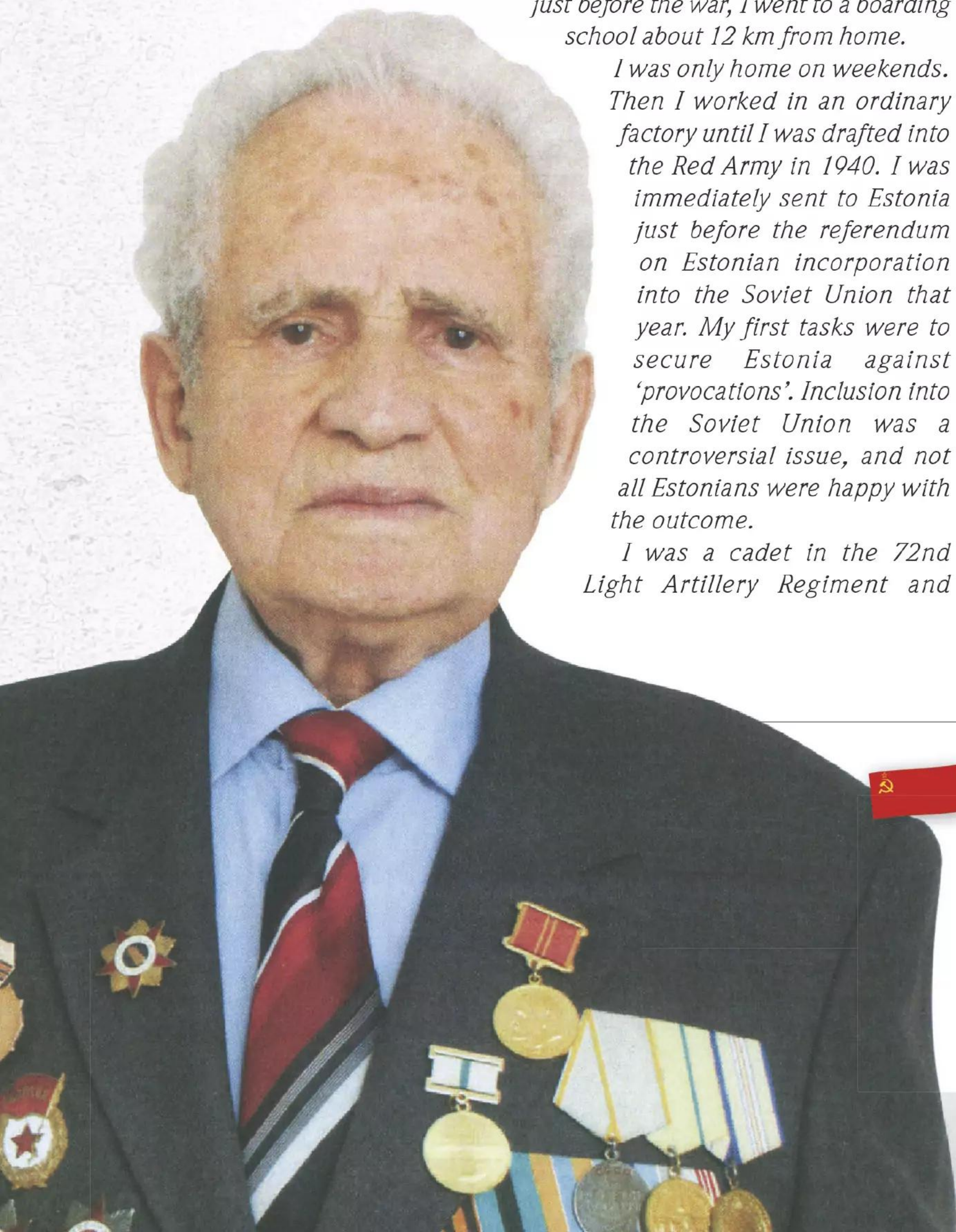
spent much of that time on exercise. I specialised as an observer. However, I also had other duties – including being put in charge of some of the regimental horses that pulled the guns. The horses were therefore important to us, but it was a lot of work to look after them. For example, I often spent a lot of time finding feed for them. Our training in the army was tough; it seemed like punishment for the Soviet Union’s not very impressive performance during the Winter War.

What was the reaction when you heard that Germany had attacked the Soviet Union?

We were prepared for it. Contrary to popular belief, our commanders and the Communist organisations in the army had prepared us for war with Germany. One of our majors said to us a few months before the war:

“Learn to hit the German tanks on sight, because you’re going to meet them soon.” And how right he was – contrary to the talk from our Soviet government about the unbreakable friendship between the Soviet Union and fascist Germany.

That’s not to say that we were well prepared, but we were not that surprised when the Germans attacked us. We had already been moved from Estonia to Lithuania – to the border with German-



SEMEN DAVIDOVICH CHTIPELMAN

(1922-2021) took part in the Red Army’s battles against Germany during the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. An artillery officer, Semen was involved in the defence of Leningrad, the fighting in the Caucasus and the liberation of Budapest in 1945. Semen Chtipelman died on 6th January 2021, shortly after this interview.



occupied Poland – in the spring of 1941. We thought, now it's serious.

Where did you first become part of the war and what was your role?

Many of my comrades had served in the Winter War against Finland, so they already had some experience. I didn't. But I served in Estonia, which was foreign to us, even though Estonia had just become a Soviet republic at that time.

We patrolled areas in Estonia, even though we were not at war with the country. I first became part of the war on 22nd June 1941, early in the morning. We were issued ammunition and then the war was on.

At the beginning of the war, the Soviets gave up an enormous amount of land and were pushed back on all fronts. Did you soldiers feel that you were losing the war and how did you feel during the constant retreats?

Yes, it was hard. The Germans were advancing fast, and our equipment was nowhere near their standard. We could see that when we occasionally got hold of some German military kit. Our artillery unit had 7,000 men on 22nd June 1941. About six months later, when we fought at Leningrad, 437 of us were left – the rest had died in action. But we never once thought that we might lose. We were brought up to believe that the Red Army was the mightiest of all. We fought for the Motherland, for our families and our country. We were sure we would win. I think it was that spirit that ultimately won us the war.

Our experiences around Leningrad were mainly marked by hunger, frost and death. We all suffered to varying degrees from scurvy and frostbite. Our daily ration at Leningrad was 300 grams of bread made from 40 percent flour, 20 percent wood bark and 40 percent animal feed.

We were tired and not particularly aggressive, but then neither were the Germans at that time. Winter seemed to get the better of them. Our►

Semen and his surviving comrades celebrated peace on 9th May 1945 with a trip to a photo studio.



Semen Chtipelman

unit was outside Leningrad; we were constantly hungry during that time. One day I found three frozen raw potatoes the size of walnuts. I don't think I've ever tasted anything so sweet.

Our regiment was disbanded because of the heavy losses, and later in August 1942 I joined a new unit that was to operate in the Caucasus. It was the 92nd Artillery Corps. We trained for a while and then were sent to war against the German army. We fought every day until the end of the war.

Every day we were aware that the next day there would be some of us who would no longer be there. It was very hard. After some time in the war, I couldn't cry any more – all the tears had been cried out. Instead, it felt as if I had sand in my eyes.

When was the first time you really helped to slow the advance of the Germans? Can you tell us a bit about what suddenly proved successful and how you stopped the German advance, which had been unstoppable until then?

It was in 1942 that we stopped a German division in the North Caucasus. All the participants were awarded the Red Banner. To receive this order,

one had to be a member of the Communist Party. I became a member and was given a work assignment in the Communist youth organisation Komsomol. Receiving the order was a tremendous boost for us.

Can you put into words when you felt the war was beginning to turn?

In the Crimea and in the North Caucasus and Ukraine, in 1943, we began to experience the first victories. Not without great and painful losses, but we certainly saw that the Germans were not invincible. From the summer of 1944, we felt that victory was within our grasp. The Romanian regiments fighting on the side of the Germans were among the first to lay down their arms and surrender. We met fierce resistance in Hungary, and the fighting around Budapest was particularly bloody. Hungary was an important bastion for the Germans. But once the resistance in Budapest was overcome, it was quite easy the rest of the way to Czechoslovakia and Austria, where we heard on 9th May 1945 that the war was over.

I think many people would have given up and collapsed during four years of fighting. Can

Semen served in the Red Army artillery.
As an observer, he had to pick out targets and make sure the shells hit.



My whole family, all my friends and neighbours were dead. The Jewish shtetl of my childhood was gone. I had no loved ones left. ■ Semen Chtipelman.

you tell us what drove you and kept you going for those long years?

The fight for the Motherland. My family, relatives and friends. I also knew as a Jew that it would be certain death for me if Germany won the war.

What was your experience in the cities and areas you recaptured, and how did civilians in the cities you liberated from Nazism react?

I was in the war from the beginning in June 1941 in Lithuania until Victory Day on 9th May 1945 – interrupted only by a few months in hospital after I was shot in the leg and wounded.

We encountered many different reactions from the civilian population in the places we were. In the Baltic countries there were quite divided opinions about the Red Army. We saw many who were against us, some who directly supported the Germans. They saw us as an occupying force. But there were also some with whom we could speak Russian and who were favourably disposed towards us.

In the Caucasus, Crimea and Ukraine, we were welcomed as heroes in most places. In many places we were fed, even though large parts of the population were poor. When we moved out of Soviet territory, things changed. In Romania, we saw in some places prosperous towns and countryside that had not been affected by the war at all. It was strange for us to experience this prosperity. We had not experienced such wealth in our own country – especially not in the countryside where I come from.

In Hungary we met with greater resistance. Some civilians fled from us and were hostile. Others came to us for help because the Romanians were persecuting them. We drank a lot of wine with some Hungarians. Here, too, we were surprised at how well off many of the peasants were; they lived in fine, beautiful houses and had good food.

The battles for Budapest were very hard and lasted several months. It was the last major battle I experienced. Some Hungarian units fought very fiercely. We once saw them, like deranged people, going around killing some of our wounded and fallen comrades with knives. But in January and early February, more and more Hungarians began to surrender. Soon after, the Germans surrendered and that was the end of it.

We quickly moved on to Czechoslovakia. We wanted to get there as quickly as the Americans. The Czechoslovaks welcomed us. So did the Austrians. The Austrians knew the war was over



Semen Chtipelman survived four years of brutal fighting on the Eastern Front. The war ended for him when his regiment reached Austria in May 1945.

when they saw us. That's why they rejoiced at the sight of the Red Army.

Can you tell us about the day the war ended?

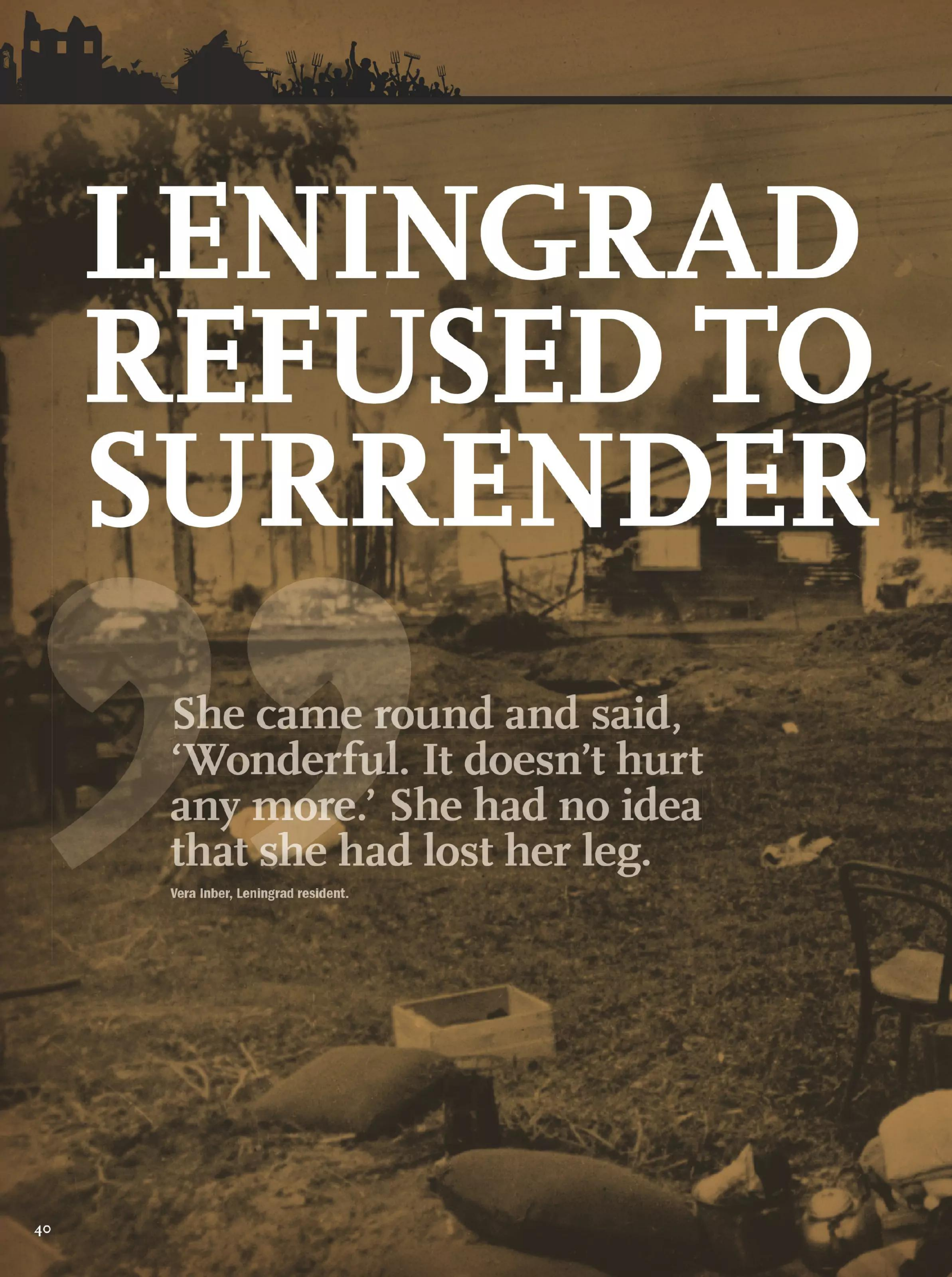
On 9th May, we had just arrived in the Lower Austrian town of Gars am Kamp. We received the message that the war had ended there. We found a photo studio and took a lot of pictures. I got the negatives, and later I distributed the pictures to my fellow officers. We didn't go home right away. We stayed in the area.

How could life go on after the war?

I came back to a shattered country, as the Soviet Union was in 1945. My whole family, all my friends and neighbours were dead. The Jewish shtetl of my childhood was gone. I had no loved ones left. The only thing I had left was the army, and I continued my service there for some years.

There are very few survivors left after WWII. How would you describe the war to the rest of us?

It's horrific. I lost everything, my family and my friends. We only have this one life. So, I would like to say to the younger generations that whatever differences states and nations have with each other, war is the worst solution. ■

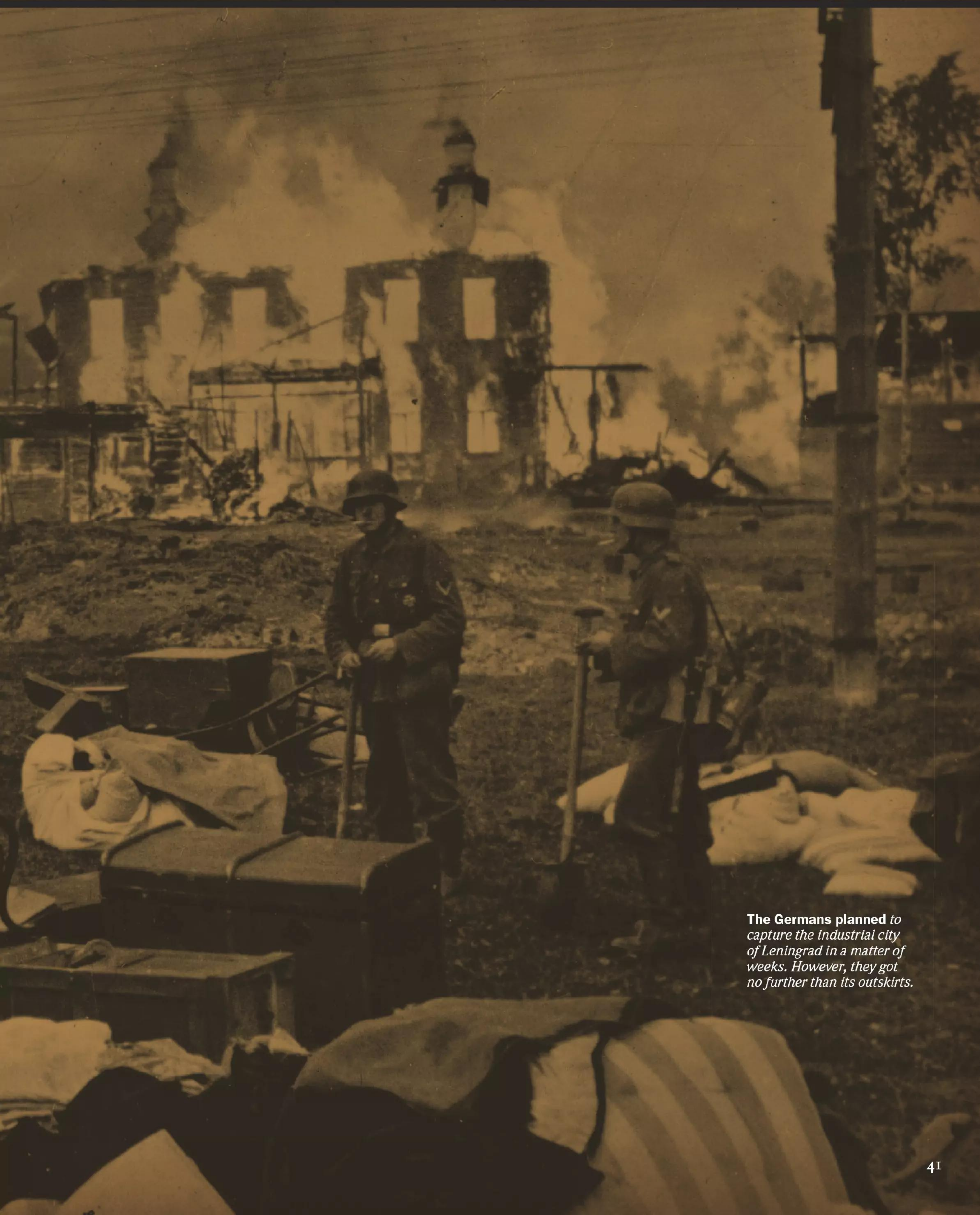


LENINGRAD REFUSED TO SURRENDER

She came round and said,
'Wonderful. It doesn't hurt
any more.' She had no idea
that she had lost her leg.

Vera Inber, Leningrad resident.

Leningrad, autumn 1941



The Germans planned to capture the industrial city of Leningrad in a matter of weeks. However, they got no further than its outskirts.

Leningrad refused to surrender

As the Germans stormed Leningrad, General Georgy Zhukov ordered everything to be put into defending the city. Thousands of civilians were sent to dig defences, citizen militias exercised in the city squares and soldiers formed a ring around the city. The Germans had to be stopped here.

By Else Christensen

Joseph Orbeli was a far-sighted man. Throughout the spring and summer of 1941, he discreetly ordered packing materials for his museum, the Hermitage in Leningrad. When German forces crossed the border on 22nd June, he was the happy owner of 50 tonnes of wood shavings, three tonnes of cotton wool and 16 km of wax cloth. The soft, shock-absorbing materials come in handy when the museum staff started packing away the many fine works of art immediately after the invasion.

They carefully wrapped hundreds of sculptures, paintings and porcelain vases, and packed them in boxes. Under heavy guard, the boxes were carried aboard a train that left the city, heading for the Ural Mountains. The museum director's caution was understandable. The Nazis never made any secret of the fact that Leningrad was high on the list of cities that Hitler wanted to control. For the next three months, the Nazis doggedly pursued their goal. And the Red Army equally stubbornly defied the Germans.

Revolution began in Leningrad

There were solid practical reasons for the Nazis to occupy Leningrad. As well as being the country's second largest city, Leningrad was home to the Soviet Union's Baltic Fleet and a busy trading port. The city was also one of its largest and most important industrial centres, but just as important to Hitler was Leningrad's history. The city, known as St Petersburg

in Tsarist times, was not only the capital of the old Russian Tsarist Empire, but also the birthplace of Bolshevism. It was here in April 1917 at the city's Finland Station that Lenin returned from his long exile to promise the people "the victory of the proletariat". And here, six months later – in October 1917 – the Red Guards launched the Russian Revolution by storming the Tsar's Winter Palace. Taking the city would thus be seen as a significant propaganda victory for the Nazis.

The task of subduing Leningrad fell to Army Group North, in what the Germans expected to be another fine display of blitzkrieg. The troops' initial advance did not disappoint. In just three days, Army Group North had occupied most of Lithuania, and the following day the soldiers managed to establish a bridgehead across the Latvian river Dvina.

"It was unlikely that I should ever again live through anything comparable to the impetuous dash of 56 Panzer Corps in the first days of the campaign – the fulfilment of all a tank-force commander's dreams," German General Erich von Manstein later wrote in his memoirs.

At this point, Manstein encountered difficulties. Part of his main force had moved away to defeat Soviet units, but was suddenly met by enemies from both north and south. As reinforcements arrived from several major Soviet cities, the situation suddenly became grave for Manstein's soldiers.

"Before long we were having our work cut out to beat off the attacks he launched on the northern bank of the Dvina with an armoured division in support, and at a number of points the position became quite critical. In the course of a counter-attack made by 3rd Panzer Division to recover some temporarily abandoned ground, our troops found the bodies of three officers and 30 men who had lain wounded in a field dressing-station captured by the enemy the previous day. Their mutilations were indescribable."

"In the next few days, the Soviet Air Force did everything possible to destroy the bridges which had been allowed to fall into our hands. With an almost mulish obstinacy, one squadron after another flew in at treetop level, only to be shot down by our fighters or Flak."

The hard fighting meant that Manstein was only able to resume the advance towards Leningrad on

Leningrad was where the Bolsheviks launched the Russian Revolution. It made the city a symbolic target for the Nazis.



2nd July after more than a week of stalemate. It would prove to be just the first of many problems that would beset the general's advance towards Leningrad.

Women dug defences

As the fighting went on, Leningrad prepared for the attack. While Hermitage staff were busy packing up artefacts, the city government mobilised all able-bodied men between 16 and 50, and all women between 16 and 45 – except those with young children. Some were assigned to dig shelters and camouflage public buildings – for example, conscripts shrouded the Smolny, a stately pillared building that housed Lenin's office during the revolution, in a huge net, while amateur mountaineers scaled the Admiralty Building's golden spire to repaint it green.

More than 50,000 civilians, mostly women and teenagers, were ordered to dig defences along the Luga River about 100 km south-west of Leningrad. Olga Grechina, a 17-year-old student at Leningrad University, was one of the thousands of teenagers released to work on the Luga Line. During the work, the conscripts boarded with local host families. Grechina described the work of digging defences:

"It was to dig anti-tank ditches (1.2 m deep) and breastworks (supposedly 1 m high). Though our only tools were shovels, axes and stretchers [to

carry soil], we set to work enthusiastically. The days were sunny and hot. We worked from 05.00 to 20.00 or 21.00, with a two- or three-hour rest after lunch. We were well fed but there was no tea, except for what our landlady made us from lime flowers. Physically it was very tough, and after two weeks, trying to lift a stretcher, I suddenly found I couldn't straighten up again."

Others, like fellow student Yelena Kochina, were exposed to far greater dangers. German planes constantly flew over the line during excavation work, dropping bombs and attacking the workers.

"Our whole laboratory dug anti-tank trenches around Leningrad today. I dug the earth with pleasure (at least this was something practical!) ... Suddenly the gleaming wings of an aeroplane blotted out the sky. A machine gun started firing and bullets plunged into the grass not far from me, rustling like small metallic lizards. I stood transfixed, forgetting completely the air-raid drill that I had learned not long before. 'Run!' someone shouted, tugging at my sleeve. I looked back. Everyone who had been working in the trenches had run somewhere. I ran, too, though I didn't know where to go or what to do ... Suddenly I saw a small bridge. I ran towards it. Under it was a deep puddle. For a whole hour we squatted in▶

Bicycles helped the infantry to keep up with the motorised units. They required no fuel and were easy to maintain and repair.



A machine gun started firing and bullets plunged into the grass not far from me. ■ Resident of Leningrad.

this puddle, and didn't do any more work for the rest of the day," Kochina confided to her diary.

Historic town was laid to ruins

On 4th July, as German ground forces rapidly approached, General Georgy Zhukov ordered his forces to move out to defend Leningrad. The first soldiers took up positions on the Luga Line on 12th July. The following day, they launched a counter-attack. The weather was unusually hot – 30° C in the shade – and the Germans, not having anticipated a robust response, were almost blown away. In the chaos, Soviet forces even managed to drive a wedge between the main force and a motorised infantry division. The encirclement forced the stunned Germans into fierce fighting that lasted several days. When the Germans finally broke free on 18th July, one division had lost 70 of its 150 tanks. A few days later, on 3rd August, another German force struck the historic town of Staraya Russa, an important point on the route to Leningrad:

"An immediate preparation was provided by an aerial attack from VIII Fliegerkorps against the still undamaged portions of Staraya Russa, which with its many towers and churches still presented

a picture of old Russia, and turned it into rubble and ash," one German war diary reported. "Infantry Regiment 426 crossed the Polist on the tree trunks laying in the river and was able to push to the west edge of the city without any large enemy resistance.

"After strong artillery preparation, an enemy counter-attack to recapture the city struck these movements. The Russians managed to push into the southern portion of the city, especially in the spa garden area. Throughout the entire night, heavy close combat raged in the burning sea of houses ... On this occasion, luck was on our side. The enemy, who apparently wanted to attack as well, was caught in the jump-off positions by our artillery and so smashed that he quickly retreated to the east ... Unfortunately, this success was expensive. The Division had to mourn 49 killed and 118 wounded. After the hard casualties of the previous days this was a new loss which for the time being could not be replaced."

The defensive fortifications around Leningrad were built by men too old to fight in the army, who worked alongside women.

Finns took revenge

The Germans faced several problems on the road to Leningrad. The Red Army managed to surround the ►



The Red Army attacked the enemy like a swarm of locusts



The success of German forces in the early months of World War II was due primarily to the army's use of blitzkrieg. The tactic was to identify the weakest point in the enemy line, break through with a surprise attack and then – while the enemy was still in shock – surround its forces.

Soviet forces were more thorough. Drawing on defeats in previous wars, including World War I, the Soviet general staff, Stavka, adopted a new technique in the 1930s. Where the Tsarist armies had been content simply to fight

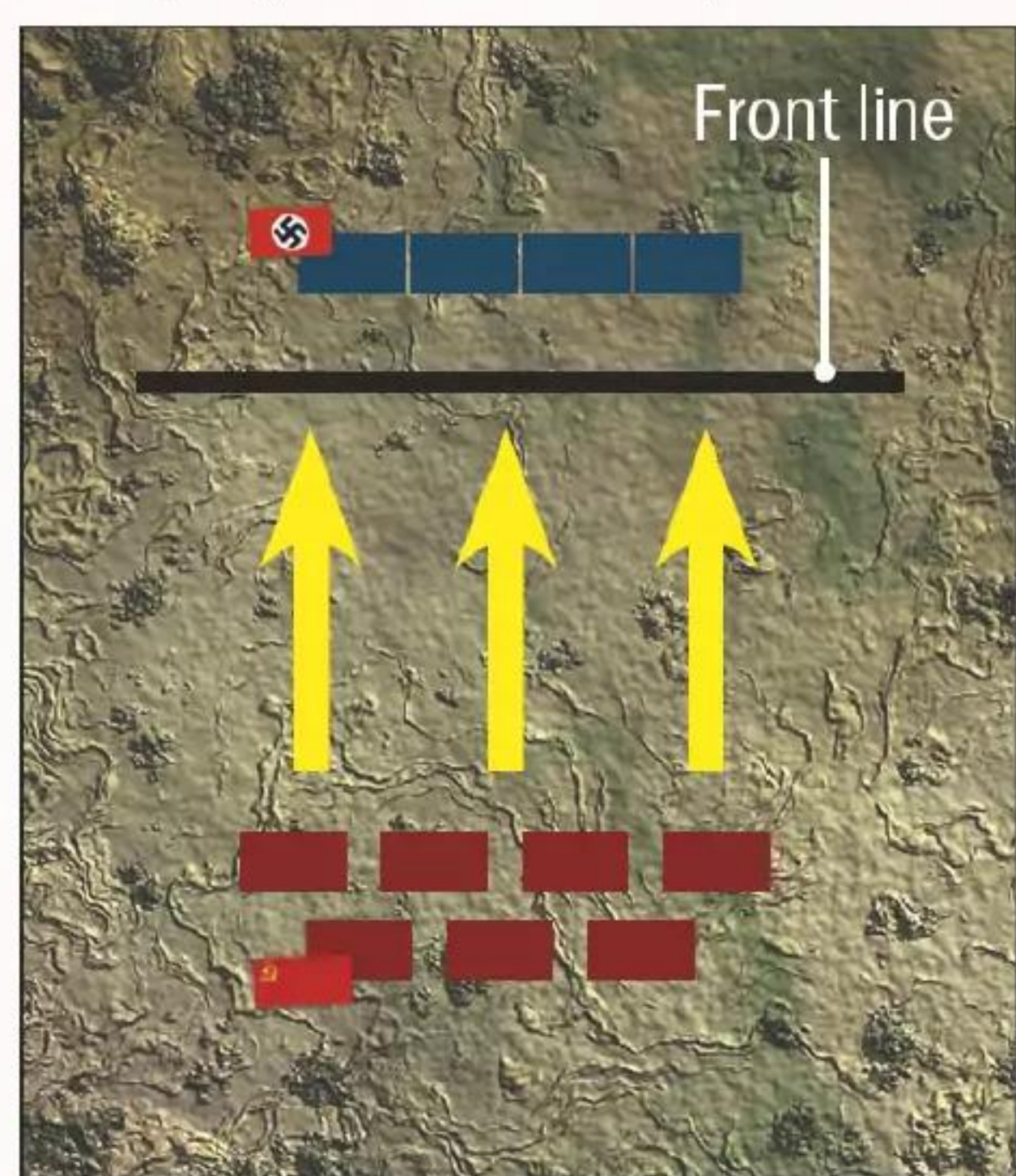
their opponents using positional warfare, the Red Army now had to move deep behind enemy lines, destroying supply and communication lines to such an extent that the enemy could not regroup and retaliate later.

The tactic, known as deep operations, was developed by General Vladimir Triandafillov, who outlined the strategy in two books on warfare published in the 1920s. The Red Army developed it further throughout the 1930s, and it came to form the playbook for Soviet warfare in World War II.

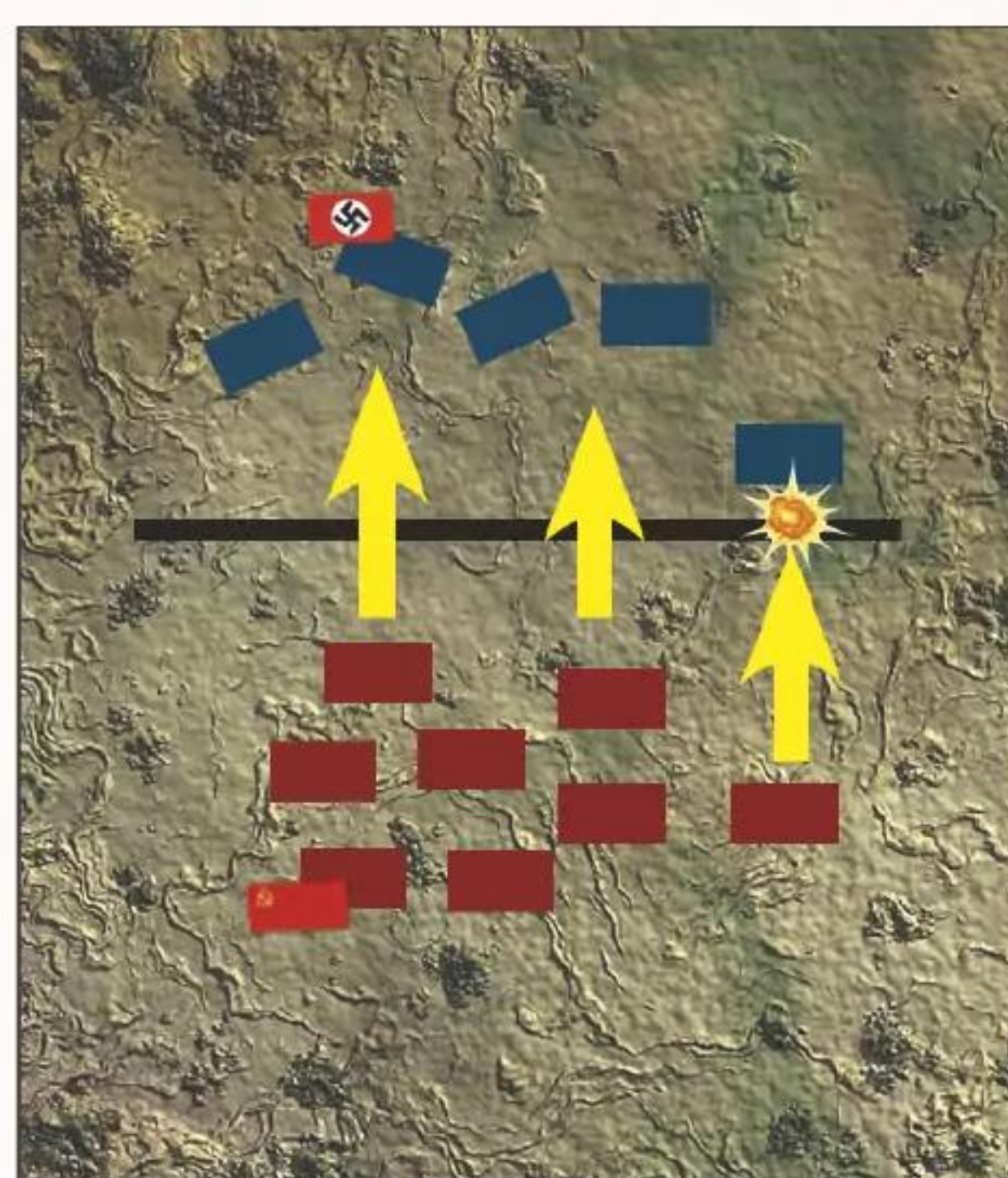


Panzer units spearheaded the Germans' pioneering blitzkrieg.

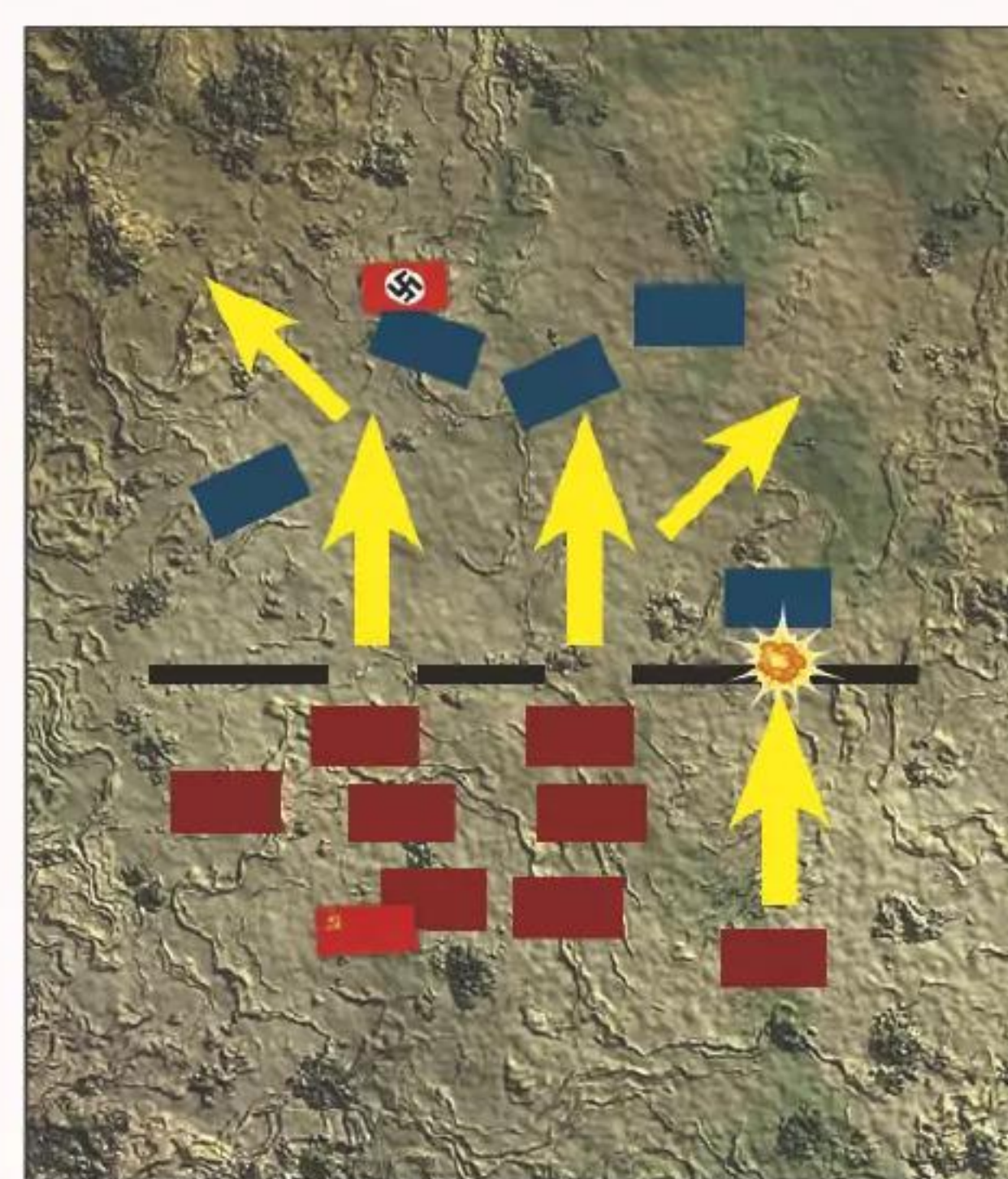
Deep operations required lots of soldiers



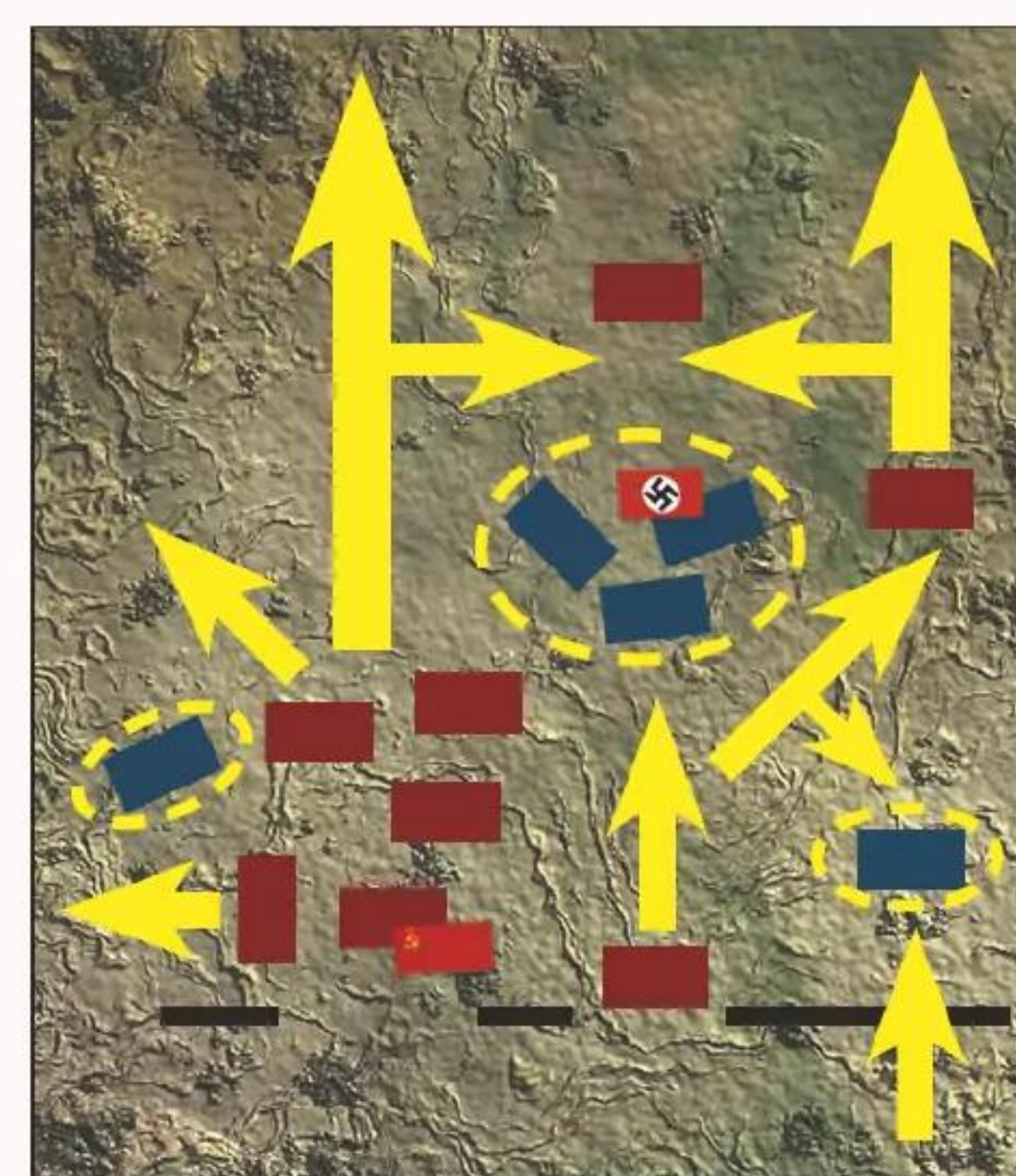
1 The deep operation relied on the Red Army's main asset – its countless soldiers. An attack began with a massive assault across a broad front, so the enemy couldn't defend the entire line.



2 Reserve troops then reinforced the attacking force to put additional pressure on the defenders. The enemy would begin to buckle and gaps would appear in the defensive lines.

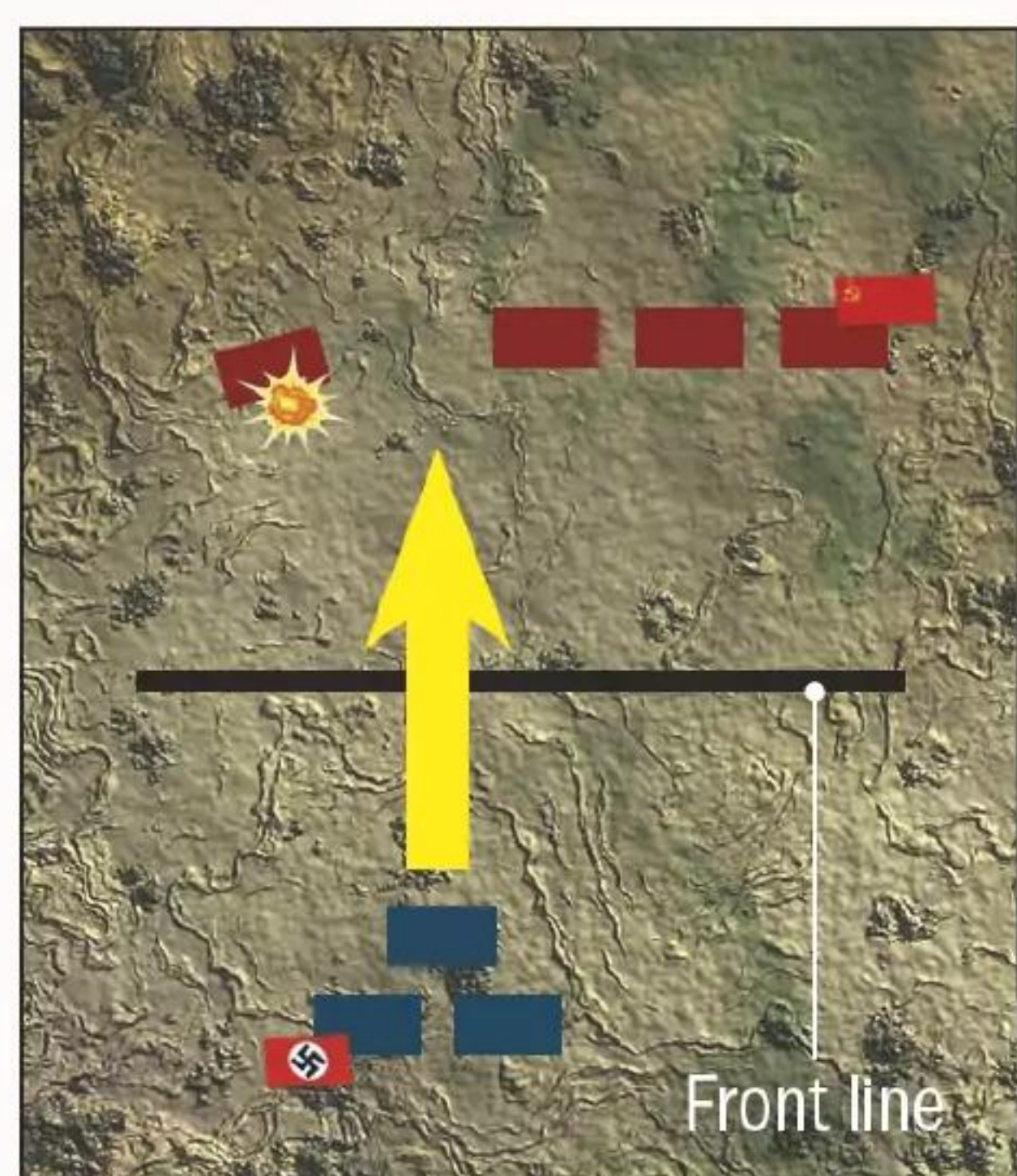


3 Attacking troops shouldn't stop when they penetrated enemy lines, but instead continue forward. However, parts of the force had to try to catch the defenders in a 'pincer'.

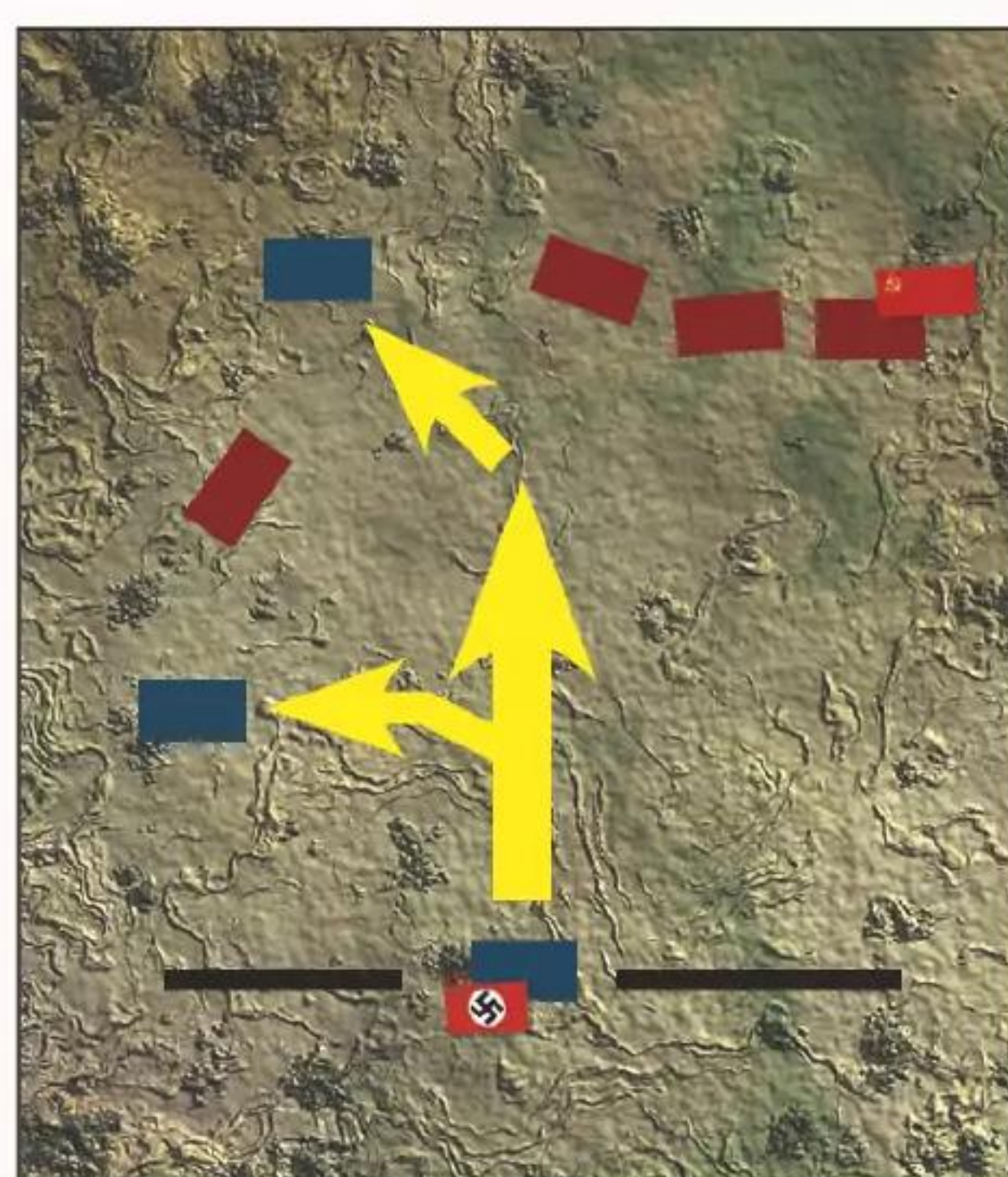


4 The main force had to penetrate deep behind enemy lines to destroy its lines of communication and supply, so the enemy's troops were completely isolated and could be defeated.

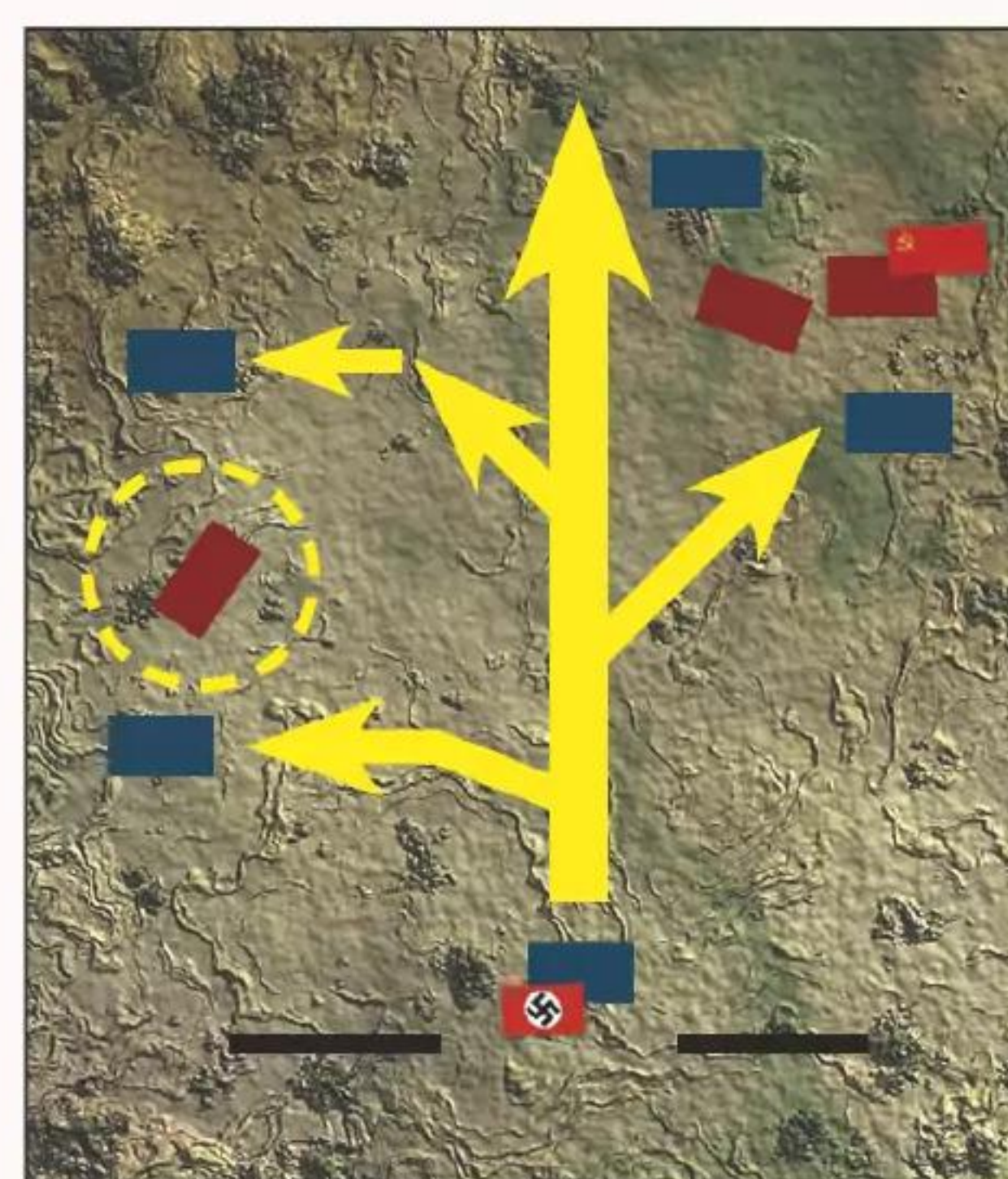
Blitzkrieg created artificial superiority



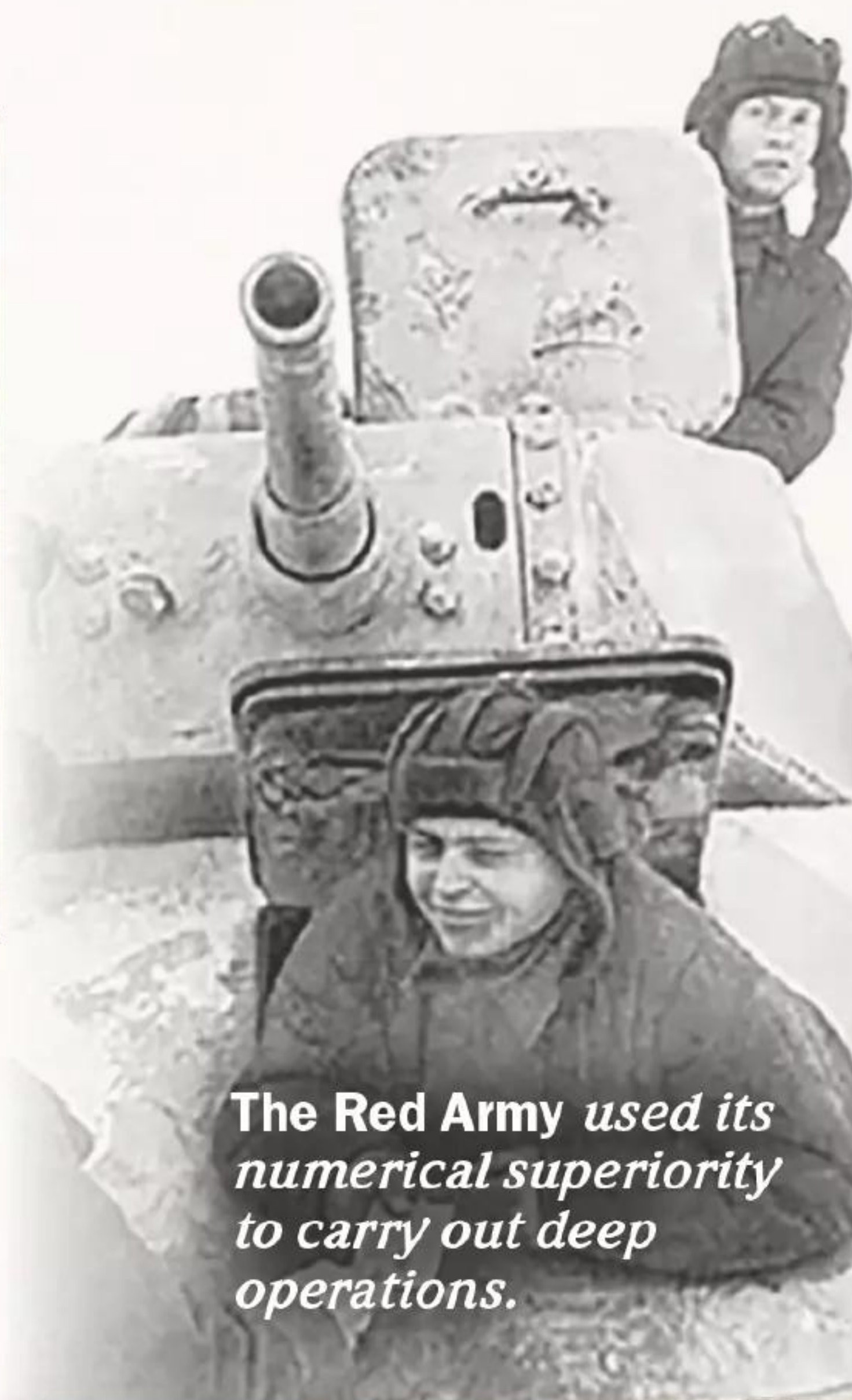
1 The Germans couldn't afford to 'waste' soldiers to the same extent. The blitzkrieg tactic picked the enemy's weakest point and directed all forces to the spot in an attack led by armoured units.



2 Panzer forces broke through enemy lines. Infantry followed on their heels, making it possible to split and artificially create superiority against a numerically larger enemy.



3 Parts of the assault force swung around, and the enemy troops were surrounded in a pincer manoeuvre. The main force continued to advance to give the enemy no time to regroup.



The Red Army used its numerical superiority to carry out deep operations.

German *X Armeekorps* (X Army Corps). From the north, General Manstein had to rush to the rescue. On 19th August, he struck a surprise attack. While Manstein attacked the Soviets from outside the pocket, the enclosed Germans fought their way out from where they were trapped. After three days, the Soviet pincer manoeuvre was broken. Manstein claimed to take 12,000 prisoners and seized or destroyed 1,412 tanks and 246 guns. The Soviet soldiers who avoided capture fled in a wild panic.

The Red Army now found itself facing more than just the Germans. Finland also joined the offensive against Leningrad. During the Winter War against the Soviet Union in 1939-40, Finland had lost the Karelian Isthmus – an area between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland, as well as its immediate surroundings. Operation Barbarossa gave Finland the chance it had been waiting for. On 25th June 1941,

the Finnish Parliament declared war on the Soviet Union. By joining the German advance towards Leningrad, they could win back their lost territory.

Finland's commander-in-chief, Marshal Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, immediately ordered his forces to advance south across the Karelian Isthmus towards Leningrad. Their advance was rapid.

The Finnish soldiers knew the terrain from the previous year's Winter War, and they also had support from both the Finnish Air Force and the Luftwaffe. On 29th August, the Finns took the town of Vyborg – around 150 km from Leningrad. Finnish soldier Eino Luukkanen visited the town where he used to live:

"Closer to Viipuri [Vyborg], the aftermath of battle was still fresh, and as all the bridges had been blown, we had to drive cautiously over temporary plank bridges, which threatened to pitch us into the water at any moment ... Although

Hitler tried – and failed – several times to persuade the Finns and Field Marshal Mannerheim (left) to attack Leningrad.



In the mud lay not just a few individual soldiers, not even tens or hundreds of them, but huge piles of mutilated and bloody corpses. ■ Holger Hørsholt Hansen, Danish journalist.

I had lived in Viipuri, I could hardly recognise the city. The superb railway station ... claimed to have been the most beautiful in the whole of northern Europe, was now a pile of rubble, and few buildings stood unscathed."

Luukkanen walked among the ruins, climbed over piles of rubble and saw no more than a few people during his entire stay in the city.

"Feeling thoroughly miserable, we continued on through Viipuri until we reached Sainio, where I had left much of my spare clothing and kit during the Winter War. Near the badly damaged hospital the horrible odour of burned human flesh assailed our nostrils, and we hastily turned away.

"Sainio's railway station and the Terijoki highway areas were jammed by the shattered remains of tanks, armoured cars, tracked vehicles and trucks, and it was with difficulty that we managed to edge our way through the tangled wreckage. There was no sign of the house that we were endeavouring to find, but then all that was left in this area, apart from the foundations of a large store, were corpses, the bloated carcasses of horses, heaps of ashes and mounds of debris. We had seen more than enough and, turning the car around, we headed back in the direction from which we had come."

Shocking death toll

During the Finnish advance, most of the Soviet 115th and 123rd Divisions managed to escape. The Finns fought the fleeing soldiers in a gigantic battle east of Vyborg on 1st September.

Danish journalist Holger Hørsholt Hansen, war correspondent for the US news agency Associated Press and the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, was among a group of reporters visiting the area shortly after the big battle:

"When [we] arrived at the battlefield, the Finnish troops were still occupied with the extermination of minor enemy groups who had slipped into the forest to continue the fighting from there. To arrive at such a theatre of war immediately after the fighting has ended – in this case it was the day after – is a terrible experience. Long before we reached the 6 km² area, we were met by a choking stench. In this 'Motti' of Hell were not just individual soldiers, not tens or hundreds of them, but huge piles of mutilated and bloody corpses. Hundreds of dead horses added to the poisoning of the air. The sight was terrible and simply beyond description. Blown-up bodies with intestines pouring out of big, gaping wounds, dead Russian and Finnish soldiers side by side in twisted positions, and terribly mutilated.

"The destruction was so complete it was hard to believe that this could take place in the year of our

Finland wanted revenge on the Soviets

Operation Barbarossa provided an opportunity for the Finns to settle an old score. By allying with Germany, Finland could regain territory lost in the Winter War.

The Winter War, which had begun when the Soviet Union invaded Finland in November 1939, cost the country dearly. The Finns held out for 105 days, but when the forces finally succumbed, they could count more than 26,000 dead. When peace was declared on 13th March 1940, the country had lost 13 percent of its original territory, including the entire Karelian Isthmus and the city of Vyborg, the country's second largest.

The fact that until December 1917 Finland had belonged to Russia only made the defeat all the more bitter. After a brief period of freedom and

independence, the great neighbour to the east had cast long shadows over the country once again. For example, the Finnish government had to refuse to enter into a defensive alliance with Sweden in early 1940, when Soviet protests over the proposal made Finns fear invasion.

When the Soviet Union invaded the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in June 1940, Finnish fears increased. Operation Barbarossa, launched a year later, seemed to offer the Finnish government not just the best, but the only, way to secure Finland's future – and to teach Stalin a lesson.



In June 1941, Finnish soldiers crossed the no man's land that had been the border with the Soviet Union since the end of the Winter War.

Lord 1941, in 'the century of culture and civilisation' ... The most terrible [thing] of all was the sight of the fallen soldiers, whose distorted faces spoke of the unbelievable pain they must have suffered. The bodies lay distended and black in the bright autumn sunshine, their arms reaching up to the sky in despair."

Soviet losses were considerable – nearly 50 tanks, 300 guns, over 700 trucks and 4,500 horses. The ►

1941-1944

Hitler wanted to wipe Leningrad off the map and starve its residents to death. For 872 days, Leningrad was famished and frozen before the Germans had to abandon their plans.

1941

In September 1941, German and Finnish forces surround Leningrad. All roads into the city are hermetically sealed, and supplies can only enter via the frozen Lake Ladoga.

The Norsuppyssy (Elephant gun) was the nickname for the Lahti L-39 weapon, which Finnish soldiers carried during the invasion of the Soviet Union.



1942

In July, Hitler orders an offensive. In September, he's forced to halt the attack because of the coming of winter.

1943

In January, the Red Army launches Operation Iskra. The forces break a gap in German lines to create a land supply route to the city.

1944

In January, after two years, four months, two weeks and five days, the Germans abandon their positions around Leningrad.



Finns also managed to capture more than 9,000 Soviet soldiers and officers. Finnish paramedic Gunnar Bergström told how he captured the commander of the Red Army's 43rd Division, Vladimir Kirpitsnikov:

"I went into the forest and caught sight of two enemies lying there with rain ponchos pulled up over their heads. I pulled the poncho off one of them and saw to my amazement a living person looking up at me with staring eyes. He wore the insignia of a major general and I immediately grabbed his hands and helped him stand up. I first took the general's 9-mm Mauser pistol from him, then his thick map briefcase and finally his big canteen, which turned out to contain three quarters of a litre of vodka."

The Finns were now just 20 km from the northern outskirts of Leningrad. Here, however, the advance of the forces ended. The country was in dire straits; as much as 16 percent of the population was engaged in work that served only the war effort. If the country committed more troops, then critical parts of its industry and agriculture would grind to a halt. In addition, the Finns feared Stalin's wrath if the attack failed.

While the Finns still fought on the Karelian Isthmus, German Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel asked Mannerheim to join the attack. He refused, and when on 31st August 1941 the Germans again asked the Finns for help in taking Leningrad, the answer was the same. The Germans tried one last time on 6th September, when Alfred Jodl, Chief of Staff of the German High Command, visited Helsinki. The Finns refused to continue the offensive against the city. The Germans would have to take Leningrad themselves.

Leningrad must be starved

Two days later on 8th September, German forces had surrounded most of Leningrad and cut off all supply lines. At 18.55 the same day, the air was filled with the piercing and ominous sound of air raid sirens and factory whistles. Shortly afterwards, a formation of more than 20 grey bombers buzzed low over the besieged city. Here they dropped their cargo

of incendiary bombs, which ignited a sea of flames as they struck.

Three and a half hours later, at 22.34, the Luftwaffe returned. As the bombers' bays opened, they released 48 high-explosive bombs. The bombardment targeted the city's food and fuel supplies. An oil depot, a dairy and 38 warehouses were hit – all near the site housing most of the city's food stocks. 24 people lost their lives.

The bombardment was only the beginning of a long series of attacks. On 19th September, German aircraft dropped as many as 528 high-explosive bombs and ►

Several weapons were produced in Leningrad, including the KV-2 tank.



The heavy tank was built at the Kirov arms factory.



Shells rained down
on the people of
Leningrad, who had to
fight for their lives
every day in a city
without food.

FACTS

The German siege of Leningrad saw up to
1,500,000
soldiers and civilians
starve to death. The death
toll peaked in the winter of
1942, when starvation
killed around
100,000
Soviets every month.

2,000 incendiary bombs. The bombs hit a shopping centre, killing 39 people. Four hospitals and the working-class district of Novaya Derevnnya were also badly damaged. Writer Vera Inber saw around 50 wounded being brought to a hospital:

"One [was] a child of about seven years old. She kept complaining that the rubber tourniquet on her leg hurt. People comforted her, telling her that the pain would soon ease. Then she was anaesthetised, and the leg amputated. She came round and said, 'Wonderful. It doesn't hurt any more.' She had no idea that she had lost her leg."

Meanwhile, German High Command decided occupying the city wasn't practical at this time.

"It is the Führer's firm decision to level Moscow and Leningrad and make them uninhabitable, so as to relieve us of the necessity of having to feed the populations through the winter. The cities will be razed by the air force. Tanks must not be used for that purpose," Halder recorded in his diary after a meeting on 21st September, and so it was decided that the city should instead be starved into submission.

Many residents were already short of food. Yelena Skryabina had to use all her ingenuity to provide food

for her two sons, her mother and the family's elderly former nanny. In mid-September, she managed to get some food from some farmers on the outskirts of Leningrad. A few days later, after queuing outside a shop for hours, she got hold of a bottle of vodka, which she traded for some potatoes from an elderly woman who was clearly drunk.

"Lucky for us that there are still such old women around," she remarked dryly.

But as time passed, hunger became ever present. Skryabina noted the changes among the families in the apartment complex where she lived.

"People turn into animals before our eyes. Who would have thought that Irina, always such a quiet, lovely woman, would be capable of beating her husband, who she has always adored? And for what? Because he wants to eat all the time and can never get enough ... The most grisly sight in our apartment is the Kurakin family. He, back from exile and emaciated by years in prison, is already beginning to bloat ... Their children cry and beg for food. But all they get is beatings."

Skryabina's family were better off than most. Thanks to an access pass to the canteen at the

barracks where her husband worked, she could obtain soup and porridge for the family. Even with these regular meals, however, hunger still plagued the family. The city government introduced rationing, which gradually worsened throughout the siege.

By the end of November 1941, everyone conducting manual labour received 250 g of bread and some meat and fat. Children and others without work had to make do with just 155 grams a day. Although Skryabina's 15-year-old son, who occasionally worked chopping firewood and shovelling snow, received the higher ration, it wasn't enough, she confided to her diary:

"He has lost interest in everything. He won't read or talk ... he's even indifferent to bombing. The only thing that rouses him is food. He's hungry all day long and rattles through the cupboards, looking for something to eat. When he can't find anything he chews on coffee grounds or those abominable oil cakes which used to be fed only to cattle ... He spends whole days standing next to the stove in his winter jacket, pale, with deep blue circles under his eyes. If he goes on like this he will die."

Luftwaffe fired thousands of shells

At the same time the bombardments continued. From early September until the end of the year, the Luftwaffe bombed the city 272 times. A total of 13,000 shells rained down on the city in attacks that sometimes lasted 18 hours straight. Vladimir Garshin, chief pathologist at a hospital, recounted the sight of hospital corridors after a typical raid:

"Shapeless lumps of human flesh, mixed with bits of clothing and brick dust, all smeared with gut contents. Relatives flooded in, some with faces motionless as masks, others screaming and shouting," he recalled.

The devastation changed the city's character. Whole neighbourhoods stood in ruins. In many places, houses lost their facades and the homeless were forced to seek shelter wherever they could. The Hermitage, the art museum whose precious collections prescient director Joseph Orbeli had been fighting to save since the start of Operation Barbarossa, was now emptied of works of art, though some of the items never made it beyond a warehouse. But the museum still teemed with life. The cellars now served as shelters, and some 2,000 of the museum's staff, artists and academics lived within the building's spacious halls and rooms. One of them was the architect Alexander Nikolsky.

"We haven't had electric lights here for more than a week. There's no heat either. We sit in the dark, with only primitive oil lamps. But we're not feeling too bad anyway, and we're planning to celebrate the New Year," Nikolsky wrote defiantly on the final day of 1941.

Leningrad didn't surrender. ■

WHY COULDN'T...

...the Germans capture Leningrad?

Hitler was convinced that the Germans could easily take Leningrad. However, problems mounted for the Germans and the historically important city remained in Soviet hands.

When the German army surrounded Leningrad, Hitler reportedly had invitations printed to celebrate victory in the city's Hotel Astoria. The dictator, however, never got to stage a party in Leningrad. Despite fierce and unrelenting attacks, the city held out through 872 days of siege until the Germans withdrew in January 1944.

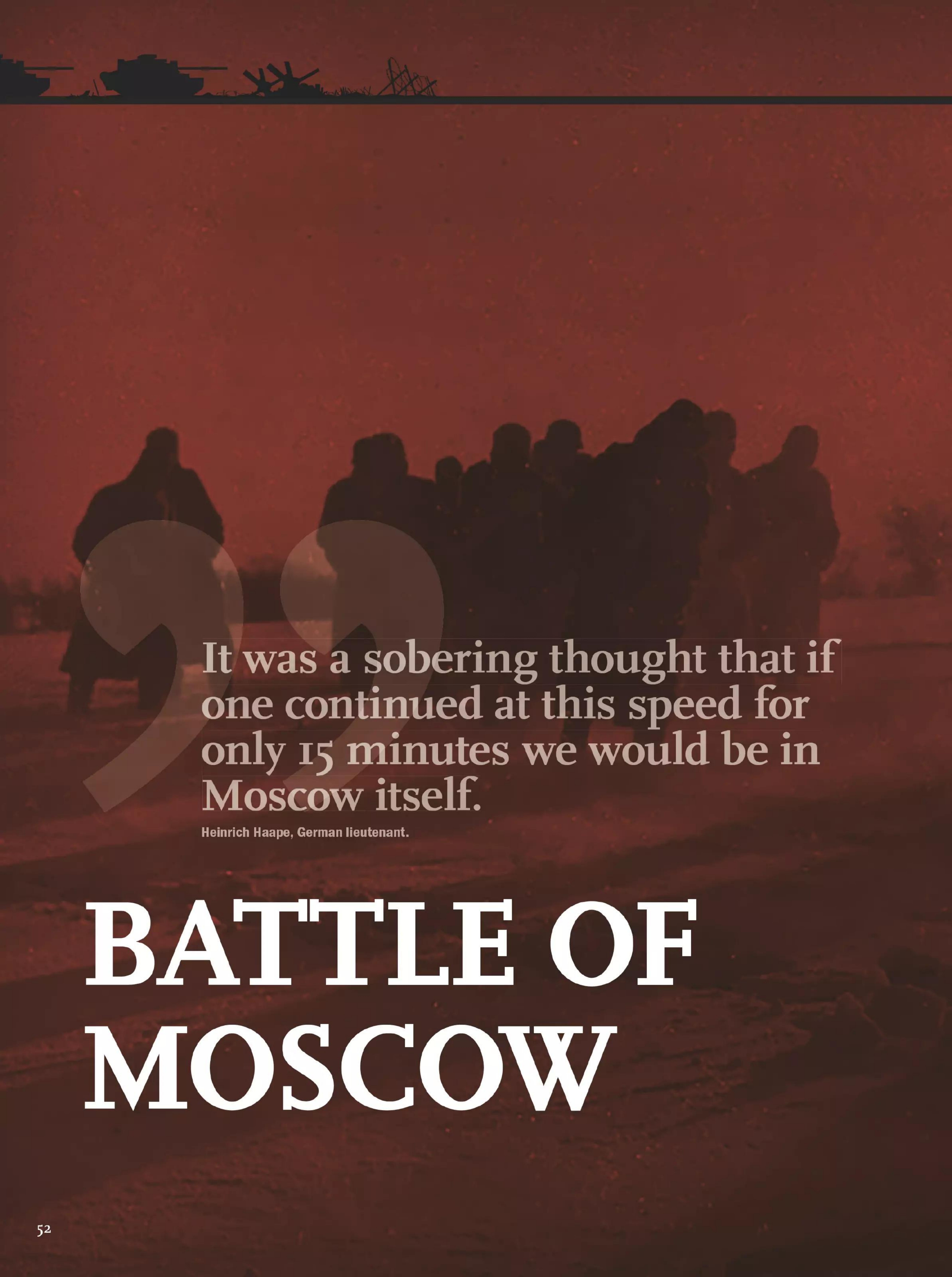
The city was at least as important to Stalin as it was to Hitler. To lose Leningrad's bustling commercial port would have been a great loss. The Soviet leader therefore made every effort to resist the Germans, both before and during the siege. The Red Army's huge numbers helped keep the Germans at bay. Meanwhile, the German army suffered from a shortage of both men and equipment. This was due partly to heavy losses, and partly to troops and materiel being spread over multiple fronts. For

example, shortly after the encirclement had closed around Leningrad, a tank army was withdrawn from the city to support the attack on Moscow. The mighty railway guns, such as the 1,350-tonne *Schwerer Gustav*, were also never deployed against Leningrad, but instead used in the attack on the southern city of Sevastopol.

Last but not least, the Finns did not participate in the attack, nor did they effectively close the encirclement around the northern part of the city. The incomplete siege meant that supplies could enter from the north-east via Lake Ladoga. The supplies ensured the population kept up their defence, still able to fight and hold out against the Germans long enough for the tide of war to turn and the Germans' fighting ability to crumble.

The *Schwerer Gustav* railway gun might have made a difference at Leningrad.





It was a sobering thought that if one continued at this speed for only 15 minutes we would be in Moscow itself.

Heinrich Haape, German lieutenant.

BATTLE OF MOSCOW

Moscow, November 1941



A few kilometres from Moscow, the Germans were halted. A combination of fresh Soviet reinforcements and winter weather ended the advance.

Battle of Moscow

German generals believed that Operation Barbarossa had delivered a series of crushing victories, and that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse. They were so sure that the capture of Moscow would send the enemy into the abyss that they drove their exhausted troops forward in one final push to crush the Red Army.

By Esben Mønster-Kjær

No army had ever suffered such losses as the Soviets during Operation Barbarossa. Now, in late September 1941, the campaign would be brought to a victorious conclusion with Operation Typhoon, launched against Moscow. If it had been up to the German generals, their soldiers would already be there. After victory at Smolensk back in July, they wanted to proceed directly to the Soviet capital, where they expected to crush any lingering resistance. But Hitler decided that the industrial city of Leningrad in the north and the rich farmland around Kiev [now Kyiv] in the south were more important targets.

“The shame of it is that time is frittering away, and time is the stuff of victory,” wrote Franz Halder in a letter to his wife. Halder was Chief of the General Staff of the German Army and thus the main force behind Operation Barbarossa’s battle plan. He always sought out quick victories, so Hitler’s campaign against Kiev was a pig’s ear in his eyes. But at least he’d been guaranteed that Moscow would be next.

And so, on 6th September, Führer Directive No 35 announced that Operation Typhoon against the Soviet capital would begin at the end of the month. This final push would bring the campaign in the East to a successful conclusion.

“Fast Heinz” struck first

Operation Typhoon began with Panzer General Heinz Guderian’s push on 30th September 1941. He was allowed to make an early start because his *Panzergruppe 2* (2nd Panzer Group) had the furthest distance to travel to reach Moscow, mostly on rough dirt roads. The opposition, however, fought back. The Red Army had dug in during the weeks the Germans had focussed their efforts on Ukraine, and it took two days for “Fast Heinz” to break through. His tanks rolled eastwards, while the rest of *Heeresgruppe Mitte* (Army Group Centre) readied itself to follow. Artillery Captain Georg Richter had spent a sunny day observing the earthworks dug by Soviet soldiers on the opposite bank of the Desna River. His rank were not privy to the High Command’s plans, but rumours were flying around.

“I believe the attack will start the next day; in my opinion it will be the last big operation this

year,” he wrote in his diary on the night of 2nd October. Richter was up again at 04.40, when 20 German batteries opened fire. Stukas circled the sky as they waited for observers to designate their targets. Signal flares flew upwards to mark the front line, Soviet positions fell one by one, and then it was the turn of the tanks. The situation was pleasantly

FACTS

Although the fighting strength of the Germans was weakened, they could still muster up to

2,000,000
men for the offensive against Moscow.



familiar to one of the German soldiers: *"Everything was rolling like in the good old days; only one order remained – get moving forward with everything available!"*

The soldier's column of half-tracked vehicles was the first German unit to break through the Soviet positions and hit the main road to Moscow.

"We were calling the shots once again in the advance. It made a tremendous impression on us! Wherever the enemy had convinced himself he had erected an invisible barrier to hold us up, we drove over it hardly noticing. We penetrated kilometre after kilometre further eastward and soon we were well in the rear of the enemy."

On the southernmost axis of advance, Guderian followed closely behind the front ranks of his panzer

divisions. Along the roadside he saw masses of burned-out wrecks whose Soviet crews had been caught off guard when German tanks suddenly appeared in front of them. Near a hilltop with a windmill, he stopped to take a longer look:

"The countryside showed traces of fierce fighting. There were dead and wounded Russians to be seen, and during the short walk to the windmill I and my companions found 14 unwounded Russians hiding in the long grass, whom we made prisoners; among them was an officer who was still engaged in talking to someone in Sevsk on a telephone."

While Army Group Centre's infantry divisions pinned down the enemy, the panzer divisions pushed past them and then moved into the enemy's rear. In the north, the trap was sprung around the town of Vyazma, some ►

Operation Typhoon
was launched at high speed. The advance of the panzer divisions proceeded according to plan, despite heavy fighting along the way.



Stalin planned to move Soviet capital east

Hitler's Berlin bunker was nothing compared to the shelter Stalin built for himself in Kuybyshev. The city would become the Soviet capital if the Germans took Moscow, and Stalin took no chances with security.

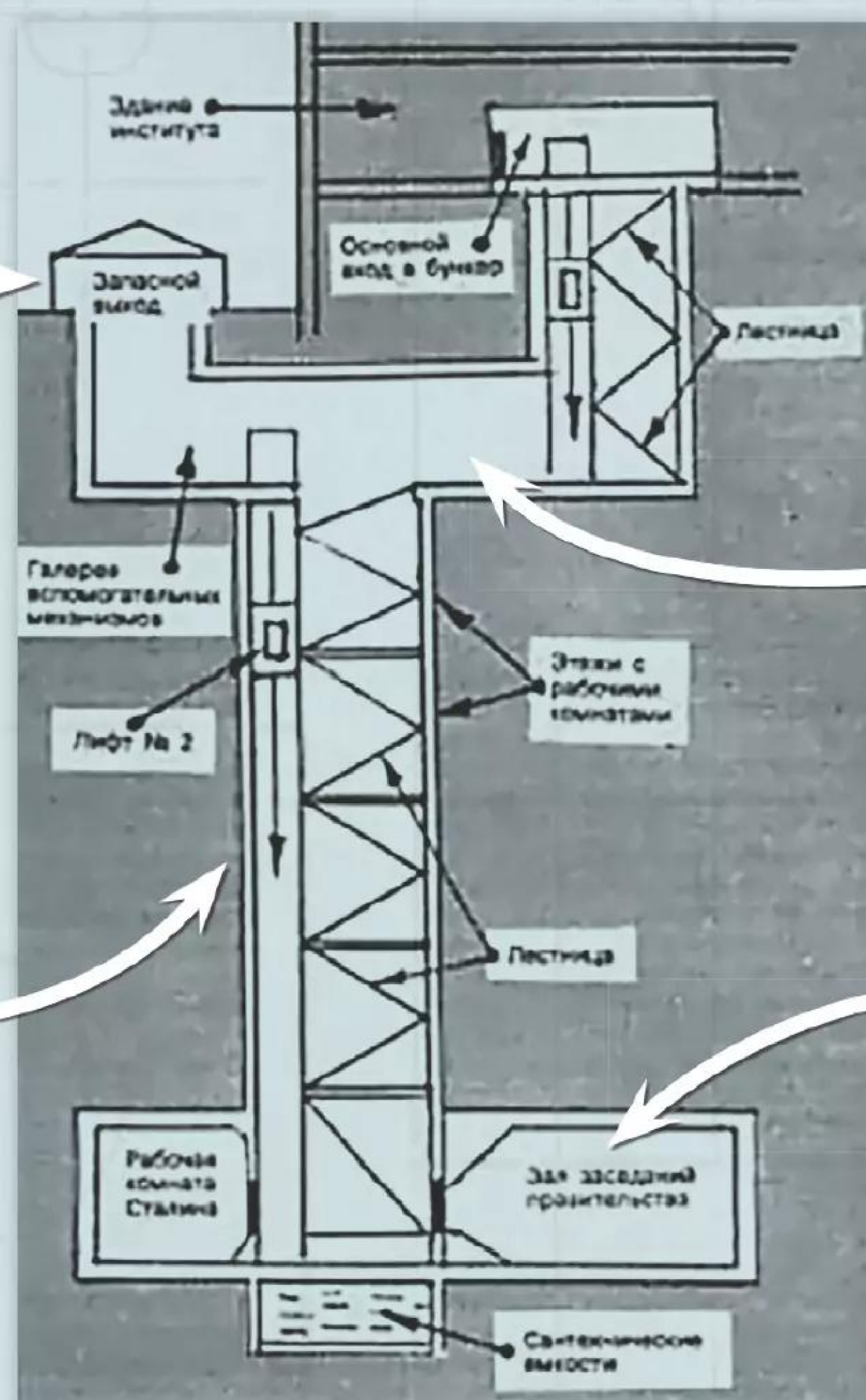
During the Battle of Moscow, Stalin sent most of the Soviet's state administration 1,000 km east to Kuybyshev, now Samara. He himself would follow if the Germans captured the capital, so a safe house was built for him. The dictator's personal quarters were 37

metres below ground, and in addition to earth, the complex was protected by a four-metre-thick layer of concrete. This meant that

the bunker could withstand a direct hit from a blast equivalent to two tonnes of TNT. The complex at Kuybyshev had its own power and water supplies, as well as enough provisions to keep it out of contact with the outside world for five days. The underground location remained a state secret until 1991.

THE ENTRANCE was via a discreet door in an administration building. From here, stairs and an elevator led 14 metres down to the secret areas below.

THE SHAFT with stairs and lift extended 24 metres down. It was surrounded by heavy concrete and flanked by offices.



ON THE TOP FLOOR were the guardroom, stores and machinery that supplied the bunker with power, water and fresh air.

STALIN'S CHAMBERS were on the lowest level 37 metres below ground, along with a conference room.

235 km from Moscow. Further south, the Germans surrounded other forces at Bryansk. The first stage of the battle plan was complete, with large Soviet forces caught in traps that began to tighten around them. Four armies were trapped at Vyazma, three at Bryansk to the south. They could not be completely cut off yet, however. Only a thin ring surrounded the hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers. A soldier from the 7th Panzer Division described the fighting:

"Inevitably it happened as it had to! With no centralised control, the Russians massed against our positions and stormed them day and night. The enemy successfully broke through several times at night. Initially with small bitterly fighting sub-units and later with dynamically led complete formations, they got through our positions. In such cases they even penetrated battalion headquarters and artillery positions, where hand-to-hand fighting broke out."

Groups of Soviet soldiers escaped, and individual divisions also managed to fight their way through the

lines. But as the days passed, the armies began to disintegrate. Supplies failed to arrive, troops ran out of ammunition and generals lost control of units. Attempts to break out continued but with less and less strength. One lieutenant watched as a disorganised mob of resigned soldiers almost wandered into one attack:

"The first bursts caused huge losses of people and materiel. Their attack was absolutely unbelievable ... Without deviating they came directly at us. What targets they presented our forward artillery observers! They sent salvos of artillery, without pause, one after the other into the enemy hordes. It caused a practically unbelievable destruction."

The armies in Vyazma finally surrendered on 13th October, and soon the rest of the enclosed forces followed. The commander of Army Group Centre, Fedor von Bock, catalogued the score in a report home:

"The battle at Vyazma and Bryansk has resulted in the collapse of the Russian front, which was fortified in depth. Eight Russian armies with 73 rifle and

cavalry divisions, 13 tank divisions and brigades and strong artillery were destroyed in the difficult struggle against a numerically far superior foe."

According to von Bock, he had taken some 675,000 prisoners, 1,300 tanks, 4,400 guns, 1,000 anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, 87 aircraft and staggering amounts of materiel. This was added to the huge quantities of prisoners and munitions that had already fallen into German hands at the start of the campaign. It seemed inconceivable that the Red Army could continue to consume manpower at such a rate for much longer.

For many Soviet soldiers, surrender had been a relief. They looked forward to avoiding starvation, the merciless German guns, diving Stuka from above and the increasingly violent chaos. But their encounters with German "mercy" made them reconsider whether it might not have been better to fight to the last man. A Soviet eyewitness saw a column of 15,000 prisoners being led west:

"Most of them could hardly keep going and despite that they were constantly cudgelled. They simply broke down and remained lying on the ground. If someone from the local population threw them a loaf of bread they would be beaten or even directly shot on the spot. The edges of the road were covered with bodies, which were left lying for days. Only 2,000 of these 15,000 prisoners survived their arrival at Smolensk."

Field Marshal von Bock personally saw the suffering of the prisoners marching away from Vyazma and Bryansk. As his staff car drove east, it passed endless lines of men in platoons:

"The impression of the tens of thousands of prisoners of war, who were scarcely guarded, marching toward Smolensk, is dreadful. Dead-tired and half-starved, these unfortunate people stagger along. Many have fallen dead or collapsed from exhaustion on the road."

His compassion did not run so deep, however, that von Bock felt compelled to do anything to help the dying men. As commander-in-chief, the prisoners were his responsibility, but he had a campaign to win, and the army's meagre supplies all went to his own troops.

Conditions did not improve significantly as the Soviet prisoners reached their camps. Operation Barbarossa was an ideological showdown and race war whose ultimate goal was to win land for the Germans to colonise. Executions, starvation and disease were the order of the day. Around 2.8 million died before February 1942, when the Nazi regime changed policy. Victory on the Eastern Front had not yet been won, and rather than leave the prisoners to perish, they would be put to good use as free labour.

Lenin's body was sent to safety

While Soviet forces still fought for their lives at Vyazma and Bryansk, General Georgy Zhukov was

given the thankless task of defending Moscow. Zhukov had the status of the Red Army's miracle worker and was sent from crisis to crisis, where he put the Soviet troops to work. But he had only 90,000 men with which to defend the capital, now the target of five German armies and two panzer groups.

The soldiers were placed in the Mozhaisk line, which lay about 100 km west of the capital. Their numbers were so few that Zhukov had to concentrate his forces on four acutely critical points. The situation seemed hopeless even to the greatest optimists inside Moscow, and their numbers dwindled daily. The front was now so close that German planes were appearing on frequent bombing raids. The air raids were not the first – the enemy had appeared over the city as early as July – and Stalin again responded with raids on Berlin. Now, though, the Luftwaffe possessed runways so close that even short-range aircraft could join the bombing missions. They had to be conducted at night, however, because a massive number of anti-aircraft guns made a daylight attack too dangerous. The factory workers, many of them women, served double duty as home defence brigade members after hours. Anastasia Egorova later described the ordeal involved in removing German incendiary bombs from the roofs:

"Of course we were frightened. These phosphorus fire bombs were blazing and throwing off sparks and you had to go right up to them, pick them up and run off and find somewhere to put them out. Sparks could quite easily hit, you know, because they were flying off in all directions. It was terrifying, of course, but after a while we got very fierce."

Stalin and senior members of the party did not feel the same swell of courage in their chests. On the contrary, the leadership began to prepare for the imminent arrival of the Germans. The Soviet leader had placed an evacuation plan for Moscow in his ►

The Red Army had a clear advantage: clothing suitable for winter weather.



The fur-lined cap is a ushanka. A German stole this hat and adorned it with the German eagle.

Thousands of civilians were sent to Moscow to dig defences to keep the German invaders out of the capital.



FACTS

If Moscow fell, Stalin would move the capital to Kuybyshev. This was where much of the **Soviet war industry** was located. After the war, the city produced army materiel almost exclusively, transforming it into a closed city where no visitors were allowed.

drawer back in the spring. Then, when the prospect of a German attack was still just rumour, a local official recommended that a million citizens be evacuated from the city immediately, just in case. But the Soviet leader refused to take this drastic step. Now, with the enemy near, the great exodus was finally under way. Stalin fired the starting pistol on 15th October when he ordered government offices closed and officials to seek refuge in the East. They were also entrusted with the coffin containing Lenin's body, so that the sacred relic would not be defiled by Nazi hands. The state administration's flight did not go unnoticed by Moscow's residents, and thousands set about packing their belongings before leaving. One journalist watched dejectedly as chaos raged at the station from which trains to Siberia departed:

"16th October was an awful day for Moscow. Trains were not just made up from passenger wagons, but also goods wagons and underground carriages. Trains ... departed in dense rows separated only by visual distance."

The evacuation should have been orderly, but panic set in from the start. Officials flocked to the station

even if they'd not been told to leave. There they were swallowed up by the crowd of residents pushing and shoving to get on a train. Behind them, in the empty homes, looting started immediately, despite police attempts to prevent the break-ins.

Stalin himself decided to remain in Moscow until further notice. He feared that if Communism's patriarch also fled, the soldiers and factory workers left behind would lose the will to resist that they would need in the coming weeks. The capital could not be given up without a fight. The Communist Party's power base lay in the large cities; Kiev had already fallen and the Germans continued to besiege Leningrad. The regime did not trust the peasants, who would rather have their old farms back than toil in forced collectivised state farms. Even here in his hour of need, the dictator remembered that he had enemies other than Hitler to watch out for.

Consequently, Stalin remained in the half-empty Kremlin, where engineering troops were already setting mine traps. When the enemy appeared



We asked for winter clothing ... but were informed that we would receive it in due course and were instructed not to make further unnecessary requests. ■ Heinz Guderian, German general.

and German staff officers took the government offices, they would be in for a nasty surprise.

Roads vanished beneath mud

West of Moscow, Army Group Centre was on the move again. It had taken two weeks and a great effort to wipe out the enemy at Vyazma and Bryansk, but now the troops once again set course for the Soviet capital. Guderian's Panzergruppe 2 had meanwhile grown by several divisions and been renamed the *2 Panzerarmee* (2nd Panzer Army). The first harbinger of winter had also appeared, as an artilleryman discovered when he looked out of a window in the middle of the night.

"It was snowing! The wind drove thick clouds of snowflakes across the earth and the ground was already covered in a thin sheet of snow. Even the assault guns parked outside on the road had taken on a curious appearance. They were completely white as if covered in icing sugar!"

As soon as the white flakes began to fall, Guderian knew trouble was coming: *"It did not lie for long and, as usual, the roads rapidly became nothing but canals of bottomless mud, along which our vehicles*

could only advance at snail's pace and with great wear to the engines. We asked for winter clothing—we had already done this once before—but were informed that we would receive it in due course and were instructed not to make further unnecessary requests of this type," he wrote.

Every spring and autumn a phenomenon the Russians dubbed *rasputitsa* (road divergence) occurred. Melting snow broke up most of the Soviet Union's unpaved road network, and vehicles had great difficulty getting around. "Fast Heinz" was stuck:

"The next few weeks were dominated by the mud. Wheeled vehicles could only advance with the help of tracked vehicles. These latter, having to perform tasks for which they were not intended, rapidly wore out. Since chains and couplings for the towing of vehicles were lacking, bundles of rope were dropped from aeroplanes to the immobilised vehicles. The supplying of hundreds of such vehicles and their crews had now to be done by the air force, and that for weeks on end."

Even before everything had drowned in mud, the Luftwaffe flew around the clock to keep the ►

Freezing temperatures continued throughout the winter of 1941, which was unusually cold even by Russian standards.



Stalin sold defeat as success

As the Germans approached Moscow, Stalin promised a swift victory. He paved the way on 6th November 1941, when he addressed a number of top Communists celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution.

The Soviet state administration had already left Moscow when Stalin tried to boost the morale of the remaining party members in the city. He himself had stayed behind so that his departure did not discourage the defending soldiers.

The anniversary of the October Revolution was to be marked by a parade on 7th November, and the day before Stalin

addressed a group of party members. He delivered an incisive analysis of German plans which had predicted victory within months. In turn, he told a huge lie when reporting German casualty figures five times higher than in actuality. He also claimed that the Germans had numerical superiority to thank for their victories. The regime hid the fact that the Red Army began the war with

huge numbers tanks and planes but had lost them due to poor leadership. Concluding the speech, Stalin predicted victory soon. The British and Americans would land in Europe, and German workers were poised to overthrow Hitler's regime. The speech demonstrated that even Stalin failed to believe that the Soviet Union was capable of holding out against Germany on its own.

1. Citation:

"In four months of war we have lost 350,000 in killed, and 378,000 missing, and our wounded number 1,020,000. In the same period the enemy has in killed, wounded and prisoners lost more than four and a half million men."

2. Citation:

"Our tanks are superior in quality to the German tanks, and our glorious tankmen and artillerymen have more than once put the vaunted troops of the Germans, with their numerous tanks, to flight. But we still have several times fewer tanks than the Germans. Therein lies the secret of the temporary successes of the German army."

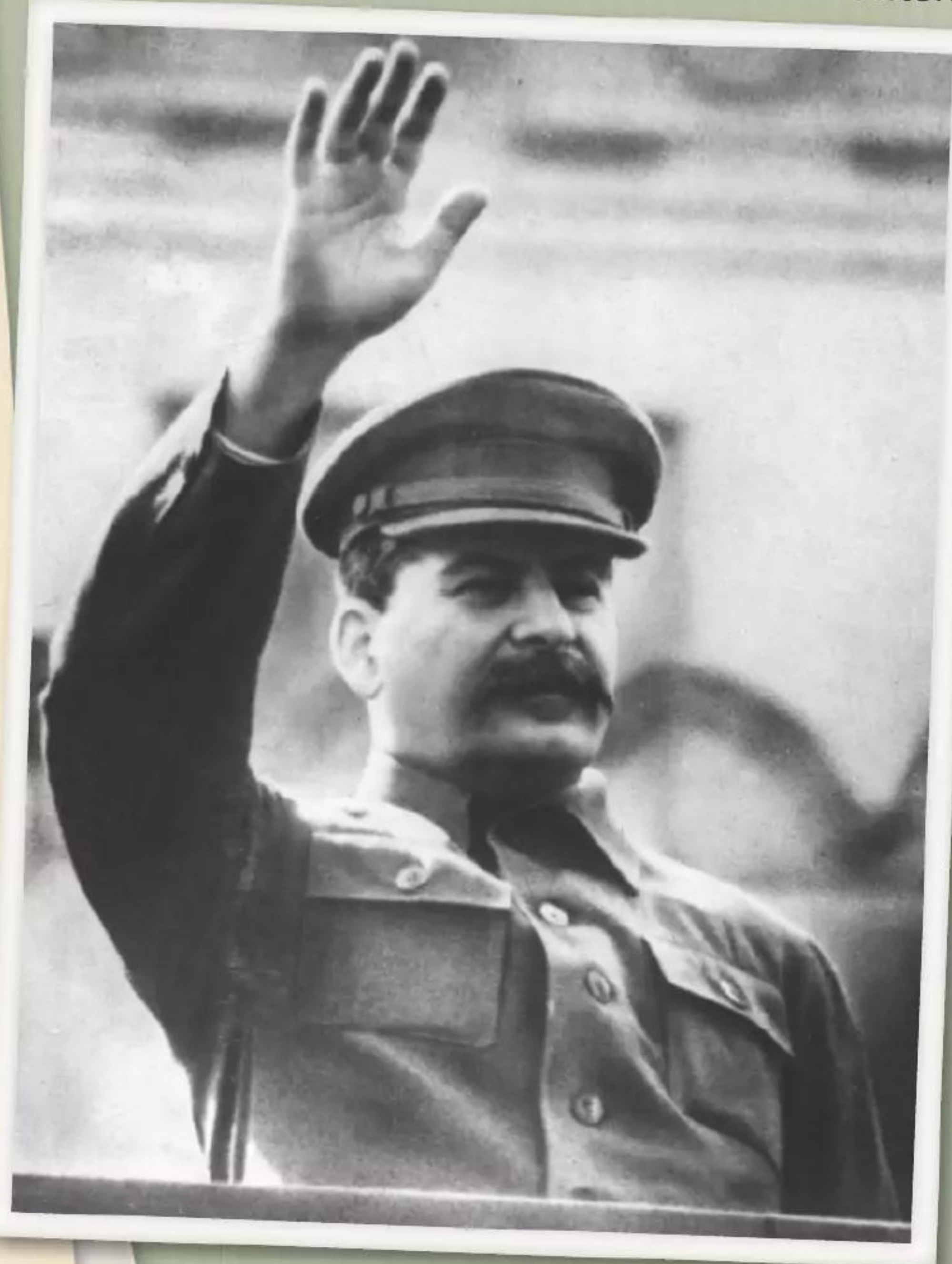
3. Citation:

"Neither can there be any doubt that the appearance of a second front on the European continent—and it must unquestionably appear in the near future—will essentially ease the situation of our army to the detriment of the German army."

4. Citation:

"Hitler's stupid policy, which has turned the peoples of the USSR into the sworn enemies of present-day Germany – all this could not but set the German people against the unnecessary and ruinous war. Only the Hitlerite fools fail to understand that not only the European rear but also the German rear of the German troops represents a volcano which is ready to erupt and overwhelm the Hitlerite adventurers."

Stalin exaggerated wildly when he claimed in November 1941 that the Germans had lost over 4.5 million men.



We had to light fires to thaw the earth before we could dig into it. ■ Vera Evsyukhova, civilian, who was ordered to dig tank traps.

advance going. The German forces had reached so far into the Soviet Union that their supply chains could no longer feed them.

As always with military battle plans, Operation Barbarossa had been based on guesswork. General Halder and the High Command's other bright minds drew on their experience and knowledge of their own forces along with intelligence about the Red Army as they tried to predict how the campaign would unfold. The Germans took for granted that they would, of course, beat the Soviets. And the generals also assumed that victory would be won within 500 kilometres of the border that had separated the two great powers since the partition of Poland.

The distance allowed Germany's fleet of trucks to keep the troops supplied. Once the Red Army had lost its resilience, it would be a manageable task for smaller forces to advance on strategically important targets further away.

This meant that the 3.8 million-strong invading army would not have to rely on the rail network in the east, whose broad gauge was around 100 mm wider than the German tracks. As the weeks passed, however, the realities of the campaign diverged ever further from the general staff's predictions. German forces won crushing victories, but they had already crossed the invisible 500 km border when the pincer manoeuvres at Smolensk and Kiev were deployed. At the same time, the fleet of trucks dwindled as lorries were lost in battle or wore out.

The railways were the only alternative, and the Germans worked feverishly to change the rail gauge. It also became necessary to reinforce the foundations under the rails, which were often in a poor state, and new stations had to be built. German locomotives could not travel as far as Soviet ones before coal and water had to be added.

By October, the Germans were able to run trains all the way to Smolensk. Just not enough. Army Group Centre needed 29 whole trainloads of supplies each day, but was promised a maximum of 20, and the figure fell as low as 16 in November. A shortage of spare parts meant that vehicles were at a standstill, and front-line units lacked basic necessities such as food, ammunition and, above all, fuel. Guderian exploded when he received an order from Hitler to capture key bridges far ahead with "fast-moving units".

"We could only advance as fast as our supply situation would allow. Travelling along the now completely disintegrated Orel-Tula road our vehicles could occasionally achieve a maximum speed of 12 miles per hour. There were no 'fast-moving units' any more. Hitler was living in a world of fantasy," Guderian wrote.

Over 1,000 km to the west, Halder had also realised that blitzkrieg was out of the question for the time being. "Viewed as a whole the situation is



Rasputitsa – road divergence – was a weather phenomenon that turned Russian roads into mud every spring and autumn.

determined by railroad capacity and flow of supplies. There is no point in pushing operations onward before we have not, step by step, established, a solid foundation for them. Failing to do that inevitably would bring fatal reverses down upon us," Halder wrote soberly on 4th November.

Aside from small advances, Army Group Centre's push was paused to allow the supply companies time to catch up with the troops in front.

Stalin told his soldiers a lie

Before mud and huge supply problems virtually halted the Germans, they had broken through the Mozhaik line. General Zhukov did not have enough men to defend the line, and nothing now stood between the invading army and the Soviet capital. 250,000 citizens were therefore conscripted to build defensive works on the city's boundaries, and Vera Evsyukhova took part in the construction of tank trenches:

"They were huge, about eight metres wide and ten metres deep – as big as that. It was mostly us women that did the work, and it was hard labour. We had to light fires to thaw the earth before we could dig into it. On top it was frozen solid, but deep down it was not so hard."

Sometimes German planes attacked, and the women had to remove the casualties before continuing their work. At the same time, new units were formed of factory workers who, after very brief training, had to be led against the enemy. Amid the feverish preparations came the anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution. Stalin decided he would mark the day even if the enemy was at the gates. In an imaginative radio address, he promised victory soon.

"Hunger and impoverishment reign in Germany to-day; in four months of war Germany has lost ►

four and a half million men; Germany is bleeding, her reserves of man-power are giving out, the spirit of indignation is spreading not only among the peoples of Europe who have fallen under the yoke of the German invaders but also among the German people themselves ... The German invaders are straining their last efforts." he claimed.

In a few months, a year at most, Hitler's empire would collapse, Stalin vowed. Artillery Cadet Mark Ivanikhin heard the words but didn't really believe the war would soon be over. As always, Stalin spoke only for a short time. Then Ivanikhin and thousands of soldiers set off,

for the day was to be marked by a demonstration of the Red Army's strength. Unit after unit marched through the snow past the Kremlin walls.

"It was winter or rather it was November, but the snow was bitterly cold and it was dark. As we paraded across Red Square I was somewhere on the fifth line on the right flank, with my eyes facing right. I was surprised to see Stalin looked so short in his hat and ear flaps, not at all like the man we had seen in the portraits everywhere," Ivanikhin wrote.

From the square, the soldiers continued directly to the front. The young artillery squadron was among

The tide of war turned for the Red Army at Moscow. The Soviets were finally able to mount a strong counteroffensive.



the few to survive the ordeal of the coming months. Temperatures dropped steadily and mud began to congeal on the Russian roads west of Moscow. The German vehicles could finally move again.

Generals put everything on the line

The time had come to make important decisions, and Chief of Staff Halder had summoned the top generals in the east to Army Group Centre's headquarters. His question to them was whether Operation Typhoon should continue. The chiefs of staff of Army Group North and South replied no, for on their fronts the

offensive power of the troops had long since been exhausted. Army Group Centre's chief of staff, however, saw the situation differently, admitting that while *"the danger that we might not succeed must be taken into account, it would be even worse to be left lying in the snow and the cold on open ground only 50km from the tempting objective"*.

The answer was exactly what Halder hoped to hear, for the High Command and Hitler himself wanted to fight on. Operation Typhoon was to continue. General Guderian was furious when he received his new order to swing in a wide arc around Moscow and capture the town of Gorky 400 km further east.

"This was not the month of May and we were not fighting in France!" he wrote. His 2nd Panzer Army was about to move into battle to take Tula south of Moscow, and from there it might be able to push 50 km further east, but that was as far as the forces could go. The order was impossible, he announced in protest. At full strength, the five armoured divisions under his command would have more than 900 tanks combined, but he could now deploy a mere 150. Halder therefore had to accept a less ambitious goal for Guderian's troops. Nevertheless, the situation looked promising when the German advance resumed on 15th November.

"Ninth Army has started the offensive and appears to have thrown back the surprised enemy a long distance. Report: 'Enemy is falling back of his own accord'. This has never happened before in this campaign," Halder noted hopefully in his war journal.

Even the more pessimistic Guderian could rejoice that his divisions were advancing steadily over the frozen and hard Russian soil:

"We are only nearing our final objective step by step in this icy cold and with all the troops suffering from the appalling supply situation ... Yet the brave troops are seizing all their advantages and are fighting with wonderful endurance despite all their handicaps. Over and over again I am thankful that our men are such good soldiers."

Cold became the biggest enemy

The freezing cold sapped their strength as the Germans continued. The temperature was permanently well below freezing, and the High Command had earlier warned that Army Group Centre should not expect winter gear until well into January. Some had begun to arrive, but not nearly enough. The soldiers had to fend for themselves, and General Guderian saw a group of his men wearing captured Soviet soldiers' coats and fur caps.

"The wind was forever howling and blowing in our faces [causing] ice to crystallise all over our faces, in front, behind, and on the nose," wrote one wretched machine gunner.

The German army's armaments were not designed for the deep frost, and even the fuel began to freeze on ►



LOSS FIGURES

Despite its victory, the Red Army's casualty figures were massive.

Around

600,000

were lost. The Germans also lost many men:

175,000

German soldiers were reported killed, wounded or missing.

It was -40° to -50°C outside. Most of the time even the rations were frozen. ■ Karl Rupp, German tank commander.



the coldest days. Antifreeze became as scarce as fuel, and even the tanks struggled to grip in the snow and ice because specialist winter fittings to attach to the caterpillar tracks never appeared. A tank commander named Karl Rupp was at the head of the advance:

"My Kampfgruppe [battle group] consisted of two PzKpfwIII [Panzer III] medium tanks, three PzKpfwII [Panzer II] light tanks, about 40 or 50 riflemen and one 88 mm. We were all dog-tired. The young men slept in any position whenever they got a chance. For weeks, we only got out of the tank for minutes at a time. Our breath condensed on the metal, so that everything you touched inside the tank was covered with ice. It was -40° to -50°C outside. Most of the time even the rations were frozen. At night we had to start up the tanks every two hours to keep the engines from freezing up."

Once the engine oil froze, the soldiers had to thaw it by lighting fires under the vehicle. The battle group's most precious weapon was the 88-mm gun. Despite being large, awkward to carry and slow to set up for firing, the gun's firepower made it indispensable.

"These alone could measure up to the Russian T-34 tanks, which were shooting up our tanks like rabbits. We were powerless to do anything about it with our light guns," Rupp recalled.

Despite the cold, supply problems and exhaustion, the advance continued. The Soviet forces in front of Moscow fought bitterly for every metre, but every day the German forces drew closer.

In late November, troops of Army Group Centre approached Moscow from the north-west. Despite the cold and exhaustion, some soldiers felt a sense of relief, for now they dared to hope that their ordeal would soon be over. With any luck, they would survive after so many of their comrades had been lost. The invasion of the Soviet Union had brought great victories, but also enormous casualties.

The campaign had already cost around 500,000 men when Operation Typhoon started, and since then a further 100,000 had been added to the tally. Officer casualties were

German soldiers surrendered to the Red Army, which suddenly received large numbers of prisoners of war.

Thousands of Czech hedgehog anti-tank obstacles were set up in and around Moscow.

The cast iron beams formed effective tank barriers to block the German blitzkrieg.

particularly high. Every third officer who had crossed the border into the Soviet Union had now been killed, wounded or captured. On paper, the *Heer* (Army) on the Eastern Front numbered 136 divisions, but in fighting strength it amounted to just 83. The weakness was greatest in the armoured and motorised infantry divisions, which formed the army's spearhead. Halder knew all this, but it failed to dent his belief that Operation Typhoon could be brought to anything other than a satisfactory conclusion.

"We must understand that things are going much worse for the enemy than for us and that these battles are less a question of strategic command than a question of energy," he lectured a general who was beginning to seriously doubt his ability to continue.

In front of the Germans stood almost 250 Soviet divisions, and reinforcements were on their way from Siberia. The strength ratio did not worry Halder, however, for many of these divisions were as weak as the Germans. The Red Army lacked munitions, and nobody from the lowest privates to senior generals had much – if any – experience to speak of. Two hundred brand new divisions had been created, but they merely replaced units already wiped out.

Inside Moscow, Stalin saw the situation much as Halder did. He worriedly asked General Zhukov to answer honestly, *"as a member of the Party"*, if the city could be held. It could, Zhukov promised – if he received reinforcements. And fresh troops came, pouring in from other fronts where German forces had ground to a halt because all supplies were being diverted to Army Group Centre. Soviet reinforcements also came from Siberia now Japan was no longer considered a threat. These divisions from the East were trained, fully manned and possessed a full inventory of guns and vehicles. On a front full of decimated forces, such units were invaluable.

The target came into sight

On 27th November, daring German soldiers succeeded in capturing a bridge leading across the Moscow-►

**The Russians are attacking. Don't you see the white ghosts?
We have got to open fire, now, now!** ■ German sergeant.

Volga Canal. The city was thus threatened by encirclement from the north. A few days later, the first units began to penetrate the city's outskirts, moving unhindered past local railway terminals and seeing signs indicating the direction to the centre. German Lieutenant Heinrich Haape sensed a rise in morale.

"Moscow, a city that had haunted our thoughts during the long, marching kilometres, and which now seemed to be approaching us like a city in a legend, screened from us by seven veils. It was a sobering, almost frightening, thought that if one continued at this speed for only 15 minutes we would be in Moscow itself, and a further 15 minutes would bring us into Red Square or to the walls of the Kremlin," Haape said of the mood.

Dreams of victory and rest, however, remained just that. Signs showed 16 km to the Kremlin, when the advance finally ground to a halt. Zhukov filled his front units with just enough troops to stop the Germans. The remainder of Soviet reinforcements were used to form a reserve that could pounce on the enemy in a counter-attack when the time came. A whiff of panic began to appear in the reports sent by Army Group

Centre to the High Command in Germany. But Chief of Staff Halder remained convinced that the enemy was on the verge of final collapse.

"I emphasise that we, too, are concerned about the human sacrifice. But an effort has to be made to bring the enemy to his knees by applying the last ounce of strength. Once it is conclusively shown that this is impossible, we shall make new decisions," Halder told the generals outside Moscow.

His determination, however, changed nothing. The German soldiers had no more strength to put into Operation Typhoon. The advance finally stalled in the first days of December, and Zhukov was able to finally seize the initiative from the Germans.

Zhukov struck back

The counteroffensive at Moscow began on 5th December. Zhukov could now throw more men into the battle than the Red Army had possessed in front of the city when Operation Typhoon began.

Artillery captain Georg Richter, whose guns had helped launch the offensive at the time, heard a sergeant sound the alarm: *"The Russians are*

Reinforcements poured into Moscow in large numbers from the Far East, where Japan was no longer perceived to pose a threat to the Soviet Union.



attacking. Don't you see the white ghosts? We have got to open fire, now, now!' For a while I could not see anything, although a burning haystack lit up the surrounding area to some extent, sufficient to shoot. But then, yes, I could see running spectre-like figures; ghosts, one might say. Our men have not got so many white camouflage smocks – they must be Russians."

For the Germans, not only had the conquest of Moscow failed, but they had no defensive plans, no prepared positions and were too scattered to form a coherent front line. The Soviet tanks could trundle effortlessly forward, while large numbers of infantry followed close behind. Panic broke out among the Germans, and soon a headlong flight was under way across the whole line. Captain Richter's column of guns was retreating on 13th December, but the road ahead was blocked by burnt-out German vehicles. The enemy was still close by.

"Brown figures poured out of the woods and a stream of German soldiers, drivers and vehicle crews came back towards me along the road. At first I did not know what I ought to do, I couldn't grasp it. One couldn't hold back the fleeing men who had been gripped by panic and shock. Most of them had not even held onto their rifles," Richter recalled.

The abrupt shift in the fortunes of war triggered a shock in Germany. The military High Command tried to get its bearings and adjust to the new realities, but Hitler denied them. He tried to talk himself into a more comfortable reality, as the armoured general Guderian experienced on 16th December 1941:

"During that night I received the call from Hitler that I had been expecting. He commanded that we hold fast, forbade further withdrawals and promised that we should receive replacements – to the number, I think, of 500 men – by air."

Five hundred men would not make any difference among the hundreds of thousands of German and Soviet soldiers on the move. Indeed, at this point, German generals still dared to defy Hitler's orders when they went against military logic. Operation Typhoon had failed. The Nazis' ambitions had proved greater than their strength. The same was true of the entire invasion that General Halder's staff had begun planning in the summer of 1940. The Soviet Union would not be overrun by German blitzkrieg, as had happened to a string of other countries. Hitler and his generals had to face the fact that they had committed themselves to a long, gruelling test of strength.

The Kremlin was visibly relieved to have succeeded in stopping the enemy on the doorstep of the capital. Senior Communist and future Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev saw the effect victory had on Stalin:

"After the successful conclusion of our operation outside Moscow... I was called to Moscow to consult with Stalin. I found myself

WHAT IF ...

... the Germans had captured Moscow?

If the Nazis had taken the capital, they would have delivered a major blow to the Soviets. But they overlooked the fact that the Eastern Front would not be decided by spots on the map.

Since WWII, historians have debated whether the loss of Moscow might have settled the war on the Eastern Front. However, the capital was never part of Operation Barbarossa, which aimed solely to wipe out the Red Army; a goal that by autumn 1941 seemed within reach. German High Command sent its exhausted troops forward towards Moscow to force the enemy into a final battle. The Germans were wrong, however, for despite huge losses, the

Soviet Union's fighting strength had not worn thin, as the Red Army's December counteroffensive proved.

Moscow didn't decide the war, but occupying it would have helped the Germans. Although many factories had moved east, the city still contained important war industries. The city was also the centre of the railway network, and its loss would have made it harder for Stalin to move his troops. The capture of Moscow would thus have put the Germans in a stronger position.



Even if the Germans had taken Moscow, the campaign in the east would not have ended there and then.

confronted with a new man... He had pulled himself together, straightened up, and was acting like a real soldier. He had begun to think of himself as a great military strategist, which made it harder than ever to argue with him... But I knew what sort of hero he was. I'd seen him when he was paralysed by his fear of Hitler, like a rabbit in front of a boa constrictor." ■

EASTERN FRONT - summer/autumn 1942



Germans exuded optimism in their letters

The soldiers of the German army were full of confidence as they marched towards Stalingrad. In a letter to his parents, Theodor Körner from Hamburg didn't doubt for a second that the battle had already been won.

18th July 1942

Letter number 7

Dear parents and dear Heinz!

I would like to take some time to send you a few lines again. We are currently advancing with the tanks in a southerly direction. I think our goal, for the time being, is Stalingrad. At least that's what I heard from the tank soldiers. In this section, the Russians are running so fast that we can't even follow with our bikes. And our daily marches are certainly not short (50-120 km). I wonder when we will be in Iraq?

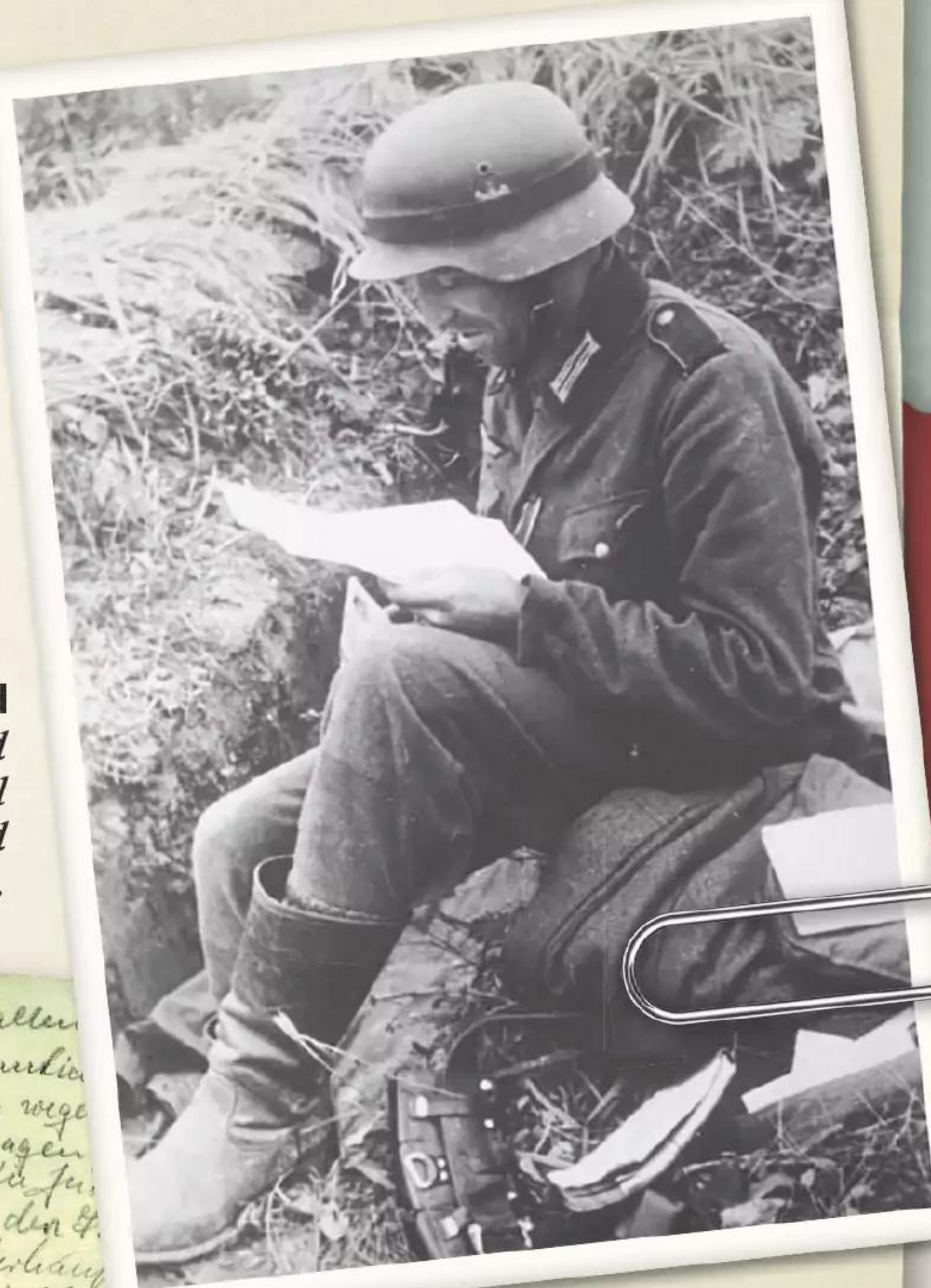
Yesterday we (the crew in the field kitchen) held a wonderful banquet. I alone ate 11 scrambled eggs and seven Zuckereier [an egg-based drink similar to eggnog]. In addition, one whole roasted chicken (!!) with new potatoes (fried in good butter). This was accompanied by plundered Russian sweet wine. So, you can certainly imagine the emotional state I was in! There was only one thing I missed... our nice room in the fire station. But it won't take too much longer, although we don't expect to be released in September. Maybe in October.

So far, I've driven 1,326 km through Russia in my car. The water pump had to be replaced once. That was the only repair so far. Hardly anything, considering that the cars are brand new and have to be broken in on Russian roads. Of the 20 cars we had in the group, seven have broken down completely so far. Two cars were attacked by 13 Russian tanks. The drivers were able to escape in time.

I just heard that Stalingrad has fallen. That would be great. Our tanks had been outside the city for a few days and couldn't get any further because of the lack of petrol. The fuel trucks were often stuck, so the Ju-52s were constantly flying forward and landing next to the roads, bringing fuel to the tanks. In general, it's all down to fuel (which we will find in abundance in Baku). Ammunition is a small matter, since there isn't much gunfire.

So, now I shall finish again. My kindest regards.

Your Theo



German soldiers' field mail was distributed through mobile mail centres that moved with the advance.

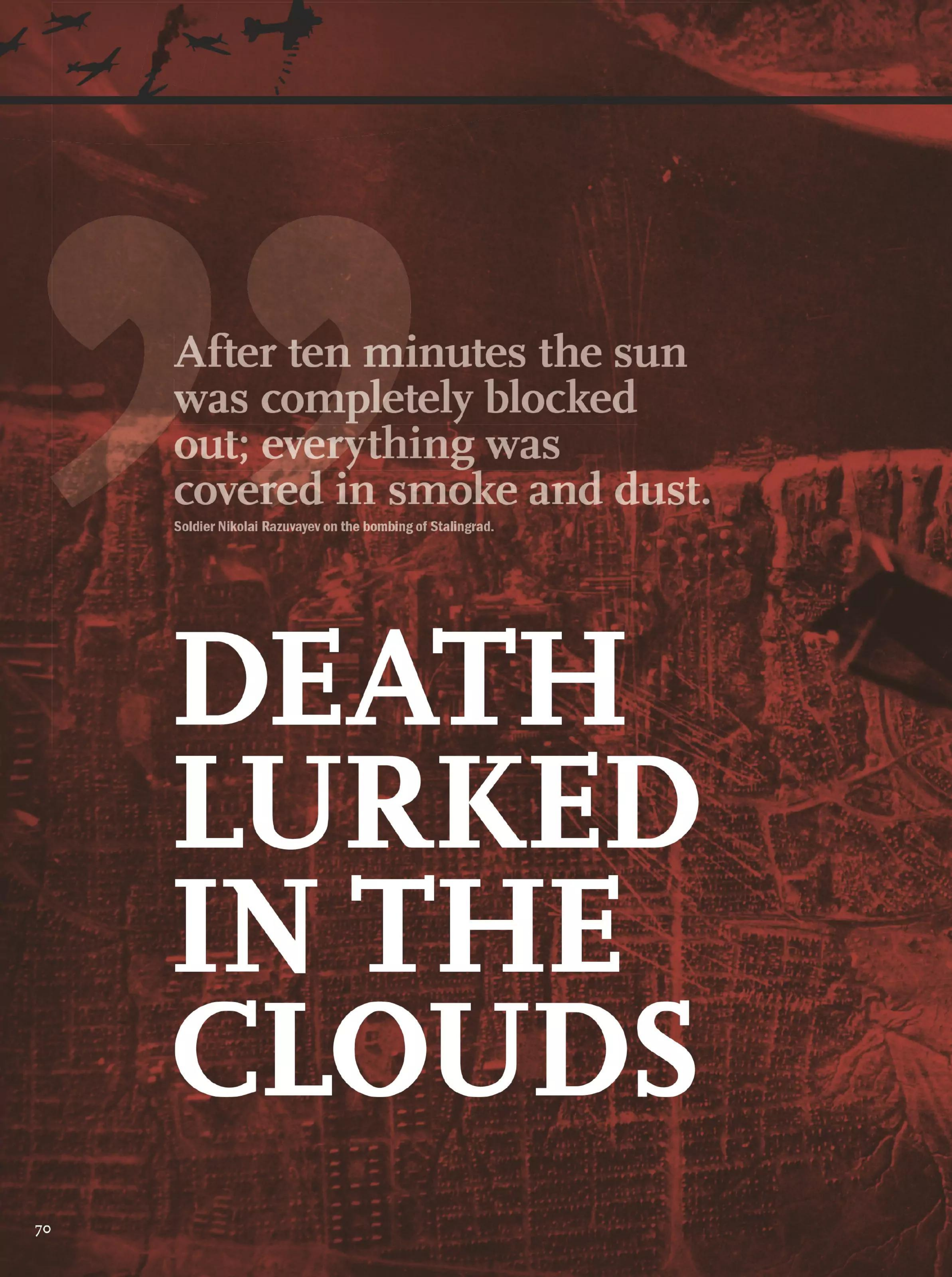
No. 7. O. U. den 18.7.1942.
Liebe Eltern und lieber Heinz!
Auf einem kleinen Post möchte ich Euch wieder mal ein paar Zeilen schreiben. Wir sind augenblicklich im Vormarsch mit den Panzern in südlicher Richtung. Ich glaube unser Ziel ist vorläufig Stalingrad. Wenigstens habe ich es von den Panzersoldaten so. In diesem Abschnitt laufen die Russen, dass wir mit den Rädern gar nicht folgen können. Und unsere Tagesmarche sind bestimmt nicht klein. (50-120 km) wenn wir wohl im Irak sein werden?

Gestern haben wir (Besatzung des LKW) ein herrliches Festbankett. Ich alleine als Reichwein und 7 Zuckereier gegessen (ganzer getrunkenes Huhn (!) mit neuen guten Butter gebraten). Dazu gab es erst Fleischwein. Also ich kommt auch sicher in welchen südlichen Regionen ich gehen habe ich mir vermerkt. Das ist ein Stück in der Feuerwache. Also alle da auch nicht mehr da, obgleich man doch noch nicht mehr da sein muss doch noch rechnen ist. Viel Luftballon zu nehmen. Ich bin bier mit meinem Wagen Russland gefahren. Die Wasserpumpe mal angeschaut werden. Bisher sehr wenig, wenn man hat

Aber habe ich Stalingrad sei gefallen. Also prima. Unsere Panzer lagen während paar Tage vorder Stadt und konnten wegen mangel nicht weiter. Die Benzinswagen nämlich oft fest und so flogen die Panzer nach vorn, landeten neben den Panzern und brachten den Panzern Sport. Überhaupt aus Brennstoff (das wir in Baku ja reichlich haben werden). Munition ist, da ja nicht viel geschossen wird. Nebenache.
So, nun will ich wieder schließen.
Liebste Euch vielmal
Ihr Theo

Volga

Grozny



After ten minutes the sun
was completely blocked
out; everything was
covered in smoke and dust.

Soldier Nikolai Razuvayev on the bombing of Stalingrad.

DEATH LURKED IN THE CLOUDS

Stalingrad, summer/autumn 1942

One thousand bombs a day for three months. The scale of the German air attack on Stalingrad meant it was quickly reduced to ruins.



Death lurked in the clouds

On 23rd August 1942, bombs fell continuously as the war reached Stalingrad, and on this ‘Black Sunday’ the Luftwaffe massacred soldiers and civilians alike. As the Red Army took to the skies, its pilots’ lack of skill was plain to see. But in the clouds over the city, day by day, the Soviets slowly turned the tide of war.

By Troels Ussing

FACTS

Germany’s Luftflotte 4 was the **world’s most powerful airborne division** in 1942.

The fighter pilots in Jagdgeschwader 52, history’s most successful air unit, provided cover for the bombers.

Shovels and hoes ploughed through topsoil compacted by the summer’s heat, as women and children toiled to dig traps and erect barricades around Stalingrad. But the civilian population was well aware that even its hardest work couldn’t keep the Germans out. Since the beginning of August, German bombers had roared across the skies above the city on the banks of the River Volga. The Luftwaffe commander on the Eastern Front, Wolfram von Richthofen, noted with satisfaction in his diary on 21st August that “blood flowed!” as he passed over an area east of Stalingrad in his small Fieseler Storch liaison plane. His bombers massacred several Soviet reserve units. The sight filled the colonel general with confidence:

“Enemy much weaker than I expected... Put the whole of Air Fleet Four in the air, with the result that we simply paralysed the Russians,” he wrote.

Richthofen was a cousin of the famous Red Baron and had also fought as a pilot during World War I, although he’d come nowhere near the fighter ace’s 80 kills. Following the war’s conclusion, the younger Richthofen – also a baron – had risen through the ranks of the German air force. Shortly before *Fall Blau* (Operation Blue), he’d assumed command of *Luftflotte 4* (Air Fleet Four) – the German air fleet on the South-east Front. Aged just 46, Richthofen already looked like an older man, but remained as fast and alert as a sea eagle behind the controls of his aircraft. His stony stare could intimidate even the bravest aviator, and the Baron was regarded a ruthless commander. Prior to the war, von Richthofen had commanded the Condor Legion in Spain, where he led the 1937 bombing raid on the Basque city of Guernica. After hours of

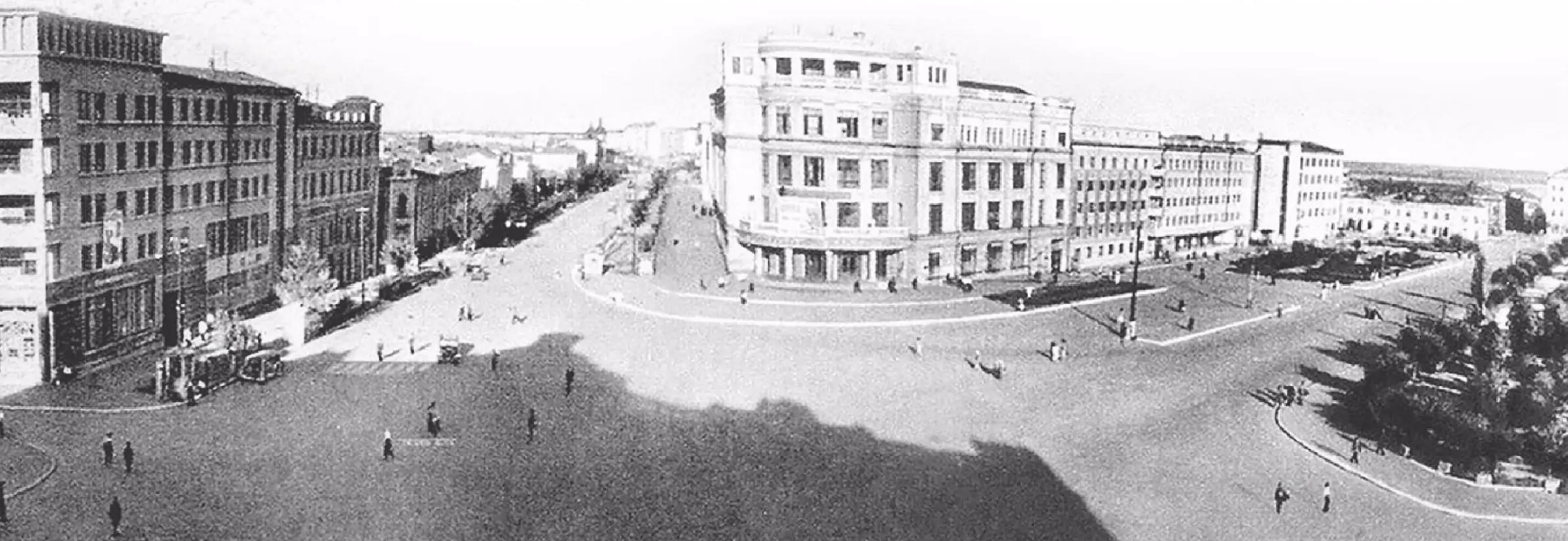
relentless pounding, the Germans pulverised the small town, killing hundreds of civilians. The attack was a victory for German-backed Spanish nationalists and a demonstration of the Luftwaffe’s ability to bomb cities to rubble. By August 1942, Richthofen was ready to turn the same weapons on Stalingrad:

“The battle for Stalingrad, the stronghold of the Reds, has begun. By inflicting devastating blows on the enemy, the Luftwaffe will bring this battle to a successful conclusion. I expect that all Luftwaffe unit commanders, both in the air and on the ground, will give their utmost to carry us towards final victory,” wrote the Baron to all units of Luftflotte 4. Following Hitler’s orders, the combined air forces on the South-eastern Front were now to concentrate exclusively on Stalingrad *“to cripple the Russians completely”*.

On the morning of 23rd August, Richthofen landed on the plain west of Stalingrad, from where General Hans Hube’s panzer forces were advancing on the industrial city. Wearing shirt sleeves with his cap pushed back on his neck so that the sweat could be seen on his bald head, the Baron stepped out into the baking heat and approached Hube:

“Make use of today! You’ll be supported by 1,200 aircraft. Tomorrow I can’t promise you any more,” said Richthofen, who couldn’t hide his pride at deploying so many planes to attack Stalingrad. With that strength, the Germans could crush the city before the first tanks and troops crossed its limits. In the late afternoon, a deafening roar sounded in the sky and Hube’s troops watched in awe as the fleet of planes marked with swastikas took off from the plain. At 18.00, Richthofen’s air armada spotted Stalingrad, meandering 30 kilometres along the western bank of

Beautiful boulevards lined the centre of Stalingrad before the war. The city was named after the Soviet leader and was modernised in 1925.



the Volga. A few minutes later, death rained down on the city.

Sirens wailed in Stalingrad

23rd August was an ordinary Sunday in war-torn Stalingrad. Its citizens had worked all day to feed the insatiable Soviet war machine. Few of the city's populace could remember the last time they'd had a weekend off. By 18.00, as the working day came to an end, the streets in the market district were busy, as observed by soldier Nikolai Razuvayev:

"I remember that the market was still buzzing with people, and children were bustling around the Prizyv cinema... All of a sudden, a voice boomed out of a loud-speaker: 'Attention, citizens – air-raid warning!' The people thronging the market and walking along the streets looked up anxiously, but didn't particularly hurry to get to the shelters, as they were already used to such alarms."

The sirens blared all over the city. Within minutes, an ominous roar sounded, and soon shells from anti-aircraft guns thundered into the sky. It soon became clear that this day's attack would go down in history:

"There had never been an air raid like that before. It actually looked like the sky was covered with airplanes... Factory number 687, a solid-tyre factory, was the first place to catch fire. It had just been rebuilt but hadn't started production yet," recalled local party secretary Claudia Denisova, who had found herself in the middle of the bombardment.

Nikolai Razuvayev witnessed first-hand how the Germans' bombs enveloped Stalingrad in all-encompassing darkness: *"After ten minutes the sun was blocked out; everything was covered in smoke and dust. The ground beneath my feet was shaking. There was a continuous roaring on all sides, and fragments of bombs and broken stone were falling from the sky."*

Richthofen's air force included the Heinkel He 111 and Junkers Ju 88 medium bombers, accompanied by the small Junkers 87 "Stuka" dive-bombers. With its built-in sirens, the Stuka's howling dive was enough to terrify anyone who heard the sound from the ground. Wave after wave of bombs blanketed Stalingrad.

"They bombed us mercilessly, and there was fire all around. It was like this: one of them flies in, bombs a street, and then the next one's right behind. This goes on and on like a conveyor belt, and all the while with the wailing sirens," explained Claudia Denisova, who at one point found herself in a building that was hit: *"It was terrifying. The shock wave knocked me through the building and pinned me to a wall, and I was covered in white plaster. One wall of the building was missing. Thankfully, no one was hurt."*

Teenager Larisa Lадnaya was also terrified when the German bombs reached her neighbourhood, ►

THE REASONS WHY...

...Soviet pilots were poorly trained

When the air attack on Stalingrad began, Soviet pilots offered no significant resistance. Poor training and lack of experience meant the pilots were no match for their enemy.

The ordinary Soviet pilot was anything but a killing machine behind the controls. Training was short and in many cases pilots had extremely poor knowledge of their aircraft. When the 220th Fighter Air Division arrived at Stalingrad, two-thirds of the pilots had only minimal experience flying the newly developed Yak-1 fighters that they were to use in the coming battle against the enemy.

On top of this, pilots had never been in combat before and were easily spooked. This was particularly evident when the Soviets flew in formation and the Germans hit their only experienced pilot – the one usually flying at the front.

"A small group is easily contained by the enemy. It loses the initiative, disperses and suffers losses, since its aircraft fight independently," was the conclusion drawn by Fedor Falaleyev,

the Air Force commander on the Southwest Front, in 1942.

Soviet pilots also didn't gain a thorough understanding of the region's geography, so even where they should have had a natural advantage, the pilots fell short. Knowledge of German aircraft types and their tactics was similarly poor until the Air Force's supreme commander, Alexander Novikov, set out to do something about the problem. In the summer of 1942, he set up an intelligence unit to uncover the Germans' secrets so that Red Army pilots could gain knowledge about what they were up against in the skies.

Until 1941 there was a narrow focus on bombers, which left Soviet fighter pilots in short supply.



The German SC250 bomb fitted most bombers.



The SC250 penetrated walls, before the explosive detonated.

where she lived with her heavily pregnant mother and two younger siblings:

"My mother went into labour when the bombs started falling. A new baby brother was born. We all went to shelter in a railway tunnel. There must have been about 30 people in there. But they started to bomb the railway line, and shrapnel flew into the tunnel. Many people were killed in that tunnel in the first days. My mother was wounded in the chest while she was feeding the baby. My mother was bleeding and the baby was crying... In the morning we buried the dead."

From early evening onwards, Richthofen's crews dropped more than 1,000 tonnes of bombs on Stalingrad, setting the city alight from one end to the other. Up to 40,000 civilians lost their lives in the attacks that night, leading to 23rd August 1942 being dubbed "Black Sunday".

The German Stuka pilots, flying back west while the summer sun still shone, let their sirens wail in salute to Hube's panzer troops on the plain. The thick columns of smoke in the distance behind them left no doubt as to the mission's success.

The Germans dominated the sky

On the morning of 23rd August, Richthofen had warned Panzer General Hube that he could not promise more planes the next day, but the baron still had plenty of machinery for the next raids.

From a total of 1,600 sorties during the first day of Stalingrad's bombing, the Germans lost only three aircraft. These tiny losses underlined the Luftwaffe's total dominance at the start of the air campaign.

At the same time, the figures were an eye-opener for the stunned Soviets: *"No one will ever forget that day – it was a living nightmare. We had been through a lot in the war up to that time, but what we saw on 23rd August was something completely different,"* noted General Andrei Yeremenko,

Stalingrad's Soviet commander. The next day, he was pleased to see the Soviets put more planes in the air.

"Now the Russian command had seen what was happening. The Soviets put all their available planes into battle," said German pilot Heinrich von Einsiedel. In his Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter, Einsiedel was one of many fighter pilots who escorted the German bombers that swooped over Stalingrad on 24th August. Now Soviet fighters were constantly appearing in the sky, but their resistance exposed another Soviet weakness: their planes were no match for the Luftwaffe. True, the Soviet Air Force had some modern and competitive Yak-1 fighters, but most Soviet planes were either the underpowered (and overweight) LaGG-3 fighter or the ageing Polikarpov I-16, dubbed *rata* (Spanish for rat) by the German pilots after its appearance in the Spanish Civil War. Outmanoeuvring and shooting down these obsolete machines was child's play for the Bf 109:

"Every German Stuka, every combat aeroplane, was surrounded by clusters of Russian fighters," Einsiedel recounted of his first sortie the day after Black Sunday. *"We threw ourselves into the tumult at random. A two-star Rata crossed my track. The Russian saw me, went into a nose dive and tried to get away by flying low. Fear seemed to have crippled him. He raced ten feet above ground on a straight course and did not defend himself. My machine vibrated with the recoil of its guns. A streak of flame shot from the petrol tank of the Russian plane. It exploded and rolled over on the ground. A broad, long strip of scorched steppe-land was all that it left behind."*

Not only were the Germans' machines more robust, their pilots were also far more experienced than their opponents, who often panicked when the Germans quickly shot down the most advanced aircraft in the Soviets' six-man formation.

"We flew in formations of up to five planes and each had three machine guns. We had agreed on the tactic of firing at the first Russian plane that



The bombing raid was so intense on 23rd August 1942 that columns of smoke 3.5 kilometres high rose above Stalingrad. The city burned for two months afterwards.

approached us and mostly we managed to shoot it down or damage it badly so that it turned away. When that happened, the other five Russians turned away as well," reported bomber pilot Detlef Radbruch.

Nor was the experienced and illustrious fighter pilot Johannes "Macky" Steinhoff impressed by the enemy's actions in the air: *"In fighting the Soviets, we fought an apparatus, not a human being. There was no flexibility in their tactical orientation, no individual freedom of action, and in that way they were a little stupid. If we shot down the leader in a Soviet fighter group, the rest were simply sitting ducks, waiting to be taken out."*

German superiority came at a high cost to civilians in Stalingrad. Day after day, its citizens endured ►

General Novikov's stroke of genius was that the Soviet Air Force should not counter-attack in the air, but instead assemble aircraft to protect Stalingrad.



new horrors as death flew in over the city. The endless bombardment left them no moment of peace.

"Aircraft roar all night over our heads. The sky is humming day and night, as if we were sitting under the span of a huge bridge... People are in basements. Everything is burned out... Trams and cars with no glass in their windows... The light pink sky is looking through thousands and thousands of empty windows and roofs," noted Soviet front-line reporter Vasily Grossman.

On the opposite side, Richthofen was delighted. Flying over Stalingrad in his Fieseler Storch on 25th August, the air commander saw with great satisfaction how his beloved air force had *"destroyed"* the Soviet city.

Best line of defence was in the air

After three days of intense bombing, Stalingrad had been transformed into a smoking ruin, with virtually no building left untouched. But Richthofen and his pilots continued to bomb the city. The Germans didn't just want to put the factories out of business; they also wanted to destroy the buildings. The continuing missions were also about destroying enemy supply lines, including traffic on the Volga River, where ships and barges carried ammunition and supplies to the city's defences. If the German Army was to take Stalingrad, the lifeline across the Volga must be cut. This task would become regular work for Luftwaffe pilots throughout the rest of the battle.

Although the city was in flames, all targets were difficult, be it a factory, a defensive position or a river

barge, because the Soviet soldiers manning the anti-aircraft positions in Stalingrad fought doggedly to make life difficult for the Luftwaffe. As a result, German pilots found themselves in mortal danger every time they had to *"push the bombs into the target like loaves of bread into an oven"*, as Stuka pilot Paul-Werner Hozzel put it. His compatriot Horst Ramstetter dreaded every mission where he had to pass Soviet air defences:

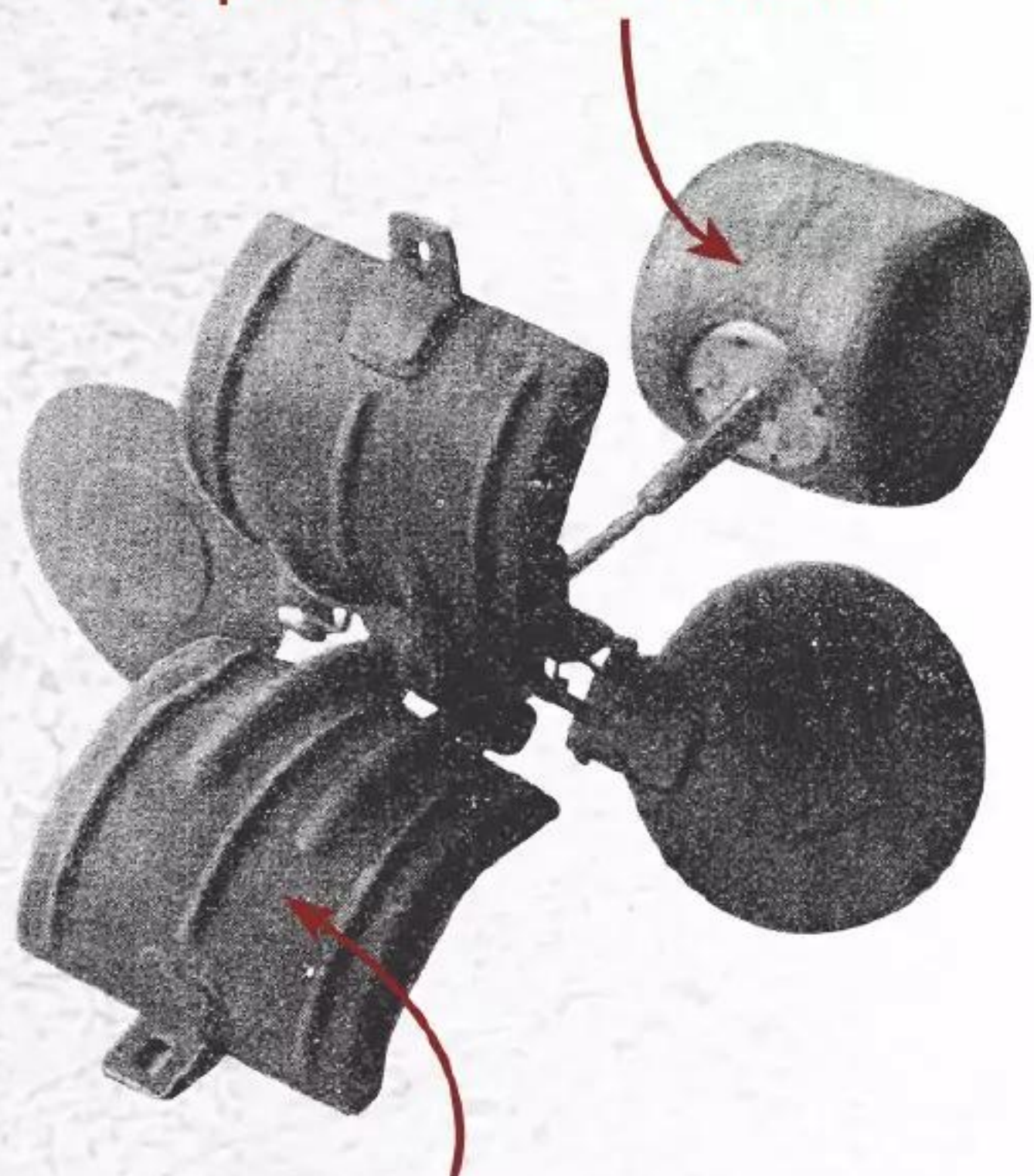
"Undoubtedly the most difficult mission was Stalingrad, because the concentration of defences was so enormous, more than at any [other] time [in] the Russian campaign. For me at any rate, it was an enormous effort to reach the various points that had been chosen as targets there, fly there and do the job... The Russians had set up their flak, and before you got to Stalingrad, you saw what looked like a wall of fire. Shells detonated, it looked like darker and lighter balls of cotton wool. And we had to fly into them! There wasn't time to be afraid because we were so preoccupied with keeping our planes in the air, but when I returned to base I felt I had just been dragged across an obstacle course. We didn't have much respite, though. We were soon in the air again."

Even the swift fighters were suffering from the increasingly heavy fire the Soviets had placed on the Volga's east bank. On 16th September, Sergeant Jürgen Kalb was forced to eject from his downed Bf 109 and parachute into the Volga. He quickly pulled himself out of the harness before swimming to shore. Here, Red Army soldiers awaited him.

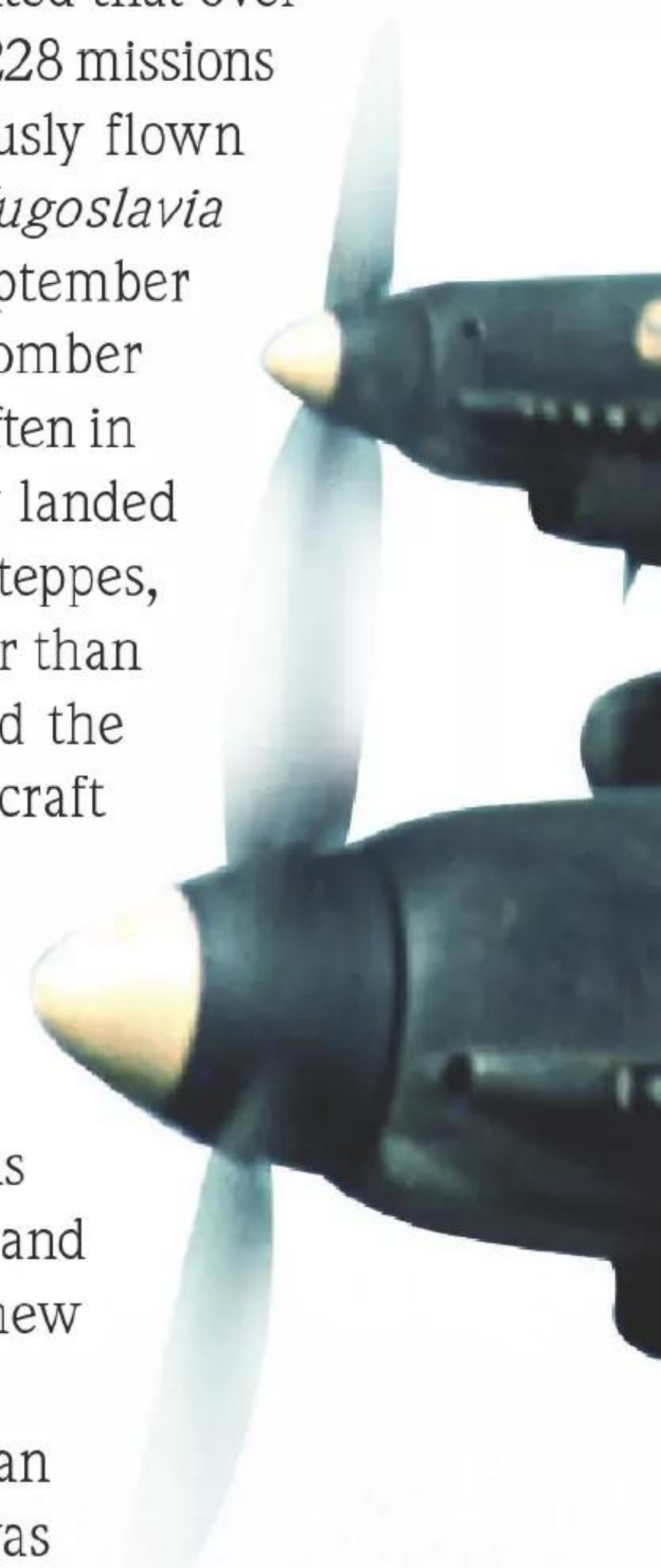
The thousands of sorties over Stalingrad meant that many Luftwaffe pilots had to fly until they died. In September, one pilot calculated that over the past three months he had flown 228 missions – the same number he had previously flown over *"Poland, France, England, Yugoslavia and Russia combined"* from September 1939 to the summer of 1942. Bomber crews on the Stalingrad front were often in the air six hours a day. When they landed at the improvised airfields on the steppes, there was no time for anything other than a bite to eat in the field kitchen and the receipt of new plans before the aircraft had to go again. Luftwaffe personnel worked around the clock on the ground too. Mechanics fitted new parts, radio technicians checked the comms system, and the weapons men checked that the machine guns and rifles were working before loading new bombs on to the waiting machines.

In the early autumn, the German troops felt that their hard work was paying off. They had the undisputed

The explosive charge of a German butterfly bomb fired splinters in all directions.



The name came from the wings that unfolded when the bomb was dropped.



upper hand. But Heinrich Einsiedel's commander, Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, nicknamed "the Prince" by the Messerschmitt pilots, tried to remind his pilots to keep their heads.

"Gentlemen, flying for fun and seeing who can shoot down the most enemy machines must stop. Every machine, every drop of fuel, every hour's flying is irreplaceable," Wilcke warned.

In the midst of the early triumphant mood, the squadron leader saw what many other German pilots were only just starting to see. The Soviet air force had not been broken, and increasing numbers of planes with red stars were appearing in the sky.

Air chief copied German success

Since the Germans had resumed their rapid advance into the Soviet Union at the beginning of the summer,

Soviet air capabilities had generally remained below par. Not only were its aircraft and pilots of poor quality, but Soviet Air Force strategies were no match for those of the enemy. As early as June 1942, General Fedor Falaleyev had identified where key problems lay.

"Our attack aircraft and bombers do not always make enemy tanks their priority targets, preferring instead to attack lorries, carts and other less important targets. Flight briefing is poor. Mission objectives are not clear or specific... Unit commanders do not bear proper responsibility for fulfilling combat missions. Causes of losses are not analysed or determined," Falaleyev argued.

To combat these issues, Stalin appointed Colonel General Alexander Novikov as the new commander of the Red Army Air Force. The appointment proved to be one of the Soviet leader's most astute ►►

German air strategy tore the enemy apart

Early success in the German air war was largely due to the pilots' innovative formation flying, with planes following each other in pairs. This simple trick easily outmanoeuvred the Soviets' traditional V-formation.

By chance, German pilots discovered that their superior aircraft could wipe out the enemy if pilots maintained formations of two pairs, staggered in altitude and distance, but within sight of each other. A pair was called a *rotte* (section), and a group of four a *schwarm* (flight). Each section had a leader who oriented forward while the pair's wingman guarded the rear. The strategy required the pilots to position

themselves so that anyone could detect an enemy approaching under cover of the sun's glare. Because vision was the only sense pilots had to orient themselves with, coordinating attacks was easier with just two planes.

Soviet air chief Alexander Novikov was not above learning from the enemy. He closely examined German fighter pilot strategy and introduced the new formation under the name

para-zveno (section-flight). In addition, the more experienced Soviet fighter pilots were assigned to carry out "zasada" attacks, ambushes in which pilots laid in wait in the sky for an opportunity to attack German heavy bombers or reconnaissance aircraft from behind.

The RAF named the technique the "finger four" formation after the different lengths of fingers on an outstretched hand.

Stuka bombers flew in a staggered formation to improve the schwarm's pilots visibility and increase their odds of spotting the enemy early.



Shells detonated, it looked like darker and lighter balls of cotton wool.
And we had to fly into them! ■ Pilot Horst Ramstetter on Soviet anti-aircraft guns.



Luftwaffe carpet-bombed factories and ferries

Hitler and his generals intended to eliminate Stalingrad as an industrial city and transport hub. Consequently, when the bombardment began in late August, the Luftwaffe's primary targets were key strategic, administrative and economic points. Pilots targeted industrial districts, including the huge tractor factory, which despite its name produced mainly tanks, and the Red October steelworks, which produced a tenth of the Soviet Union's steel in the summer of 1942. Before the attack, German intelligence services produced maps pinpointing the sprawling factory districts and marking their weak points. The bombardment on 23rd August hit the city's industrial areas hard. Communication channels in the city were also smashed, and the following day explosions cut off the water supply to large parts of Stalingrad, leaving the city's firefighters unable to tackle the raging fires.

During the vast majority of German bombing raids, pilots were also tasked with attacking shipping on the Volga, which transferred supplies and equipment from the eastern bank of the river to Stalingrad on the western side. At the same time, pilots also targeted Soviet defensive positions in the city.

1 The factories were the German bombers' main target, but although many were attacked from August onwards, they continued production, albeit at reduced levels. The Barrikady factory, which produced anti-tank guns, and the Red October steel factory continued to operate until October.

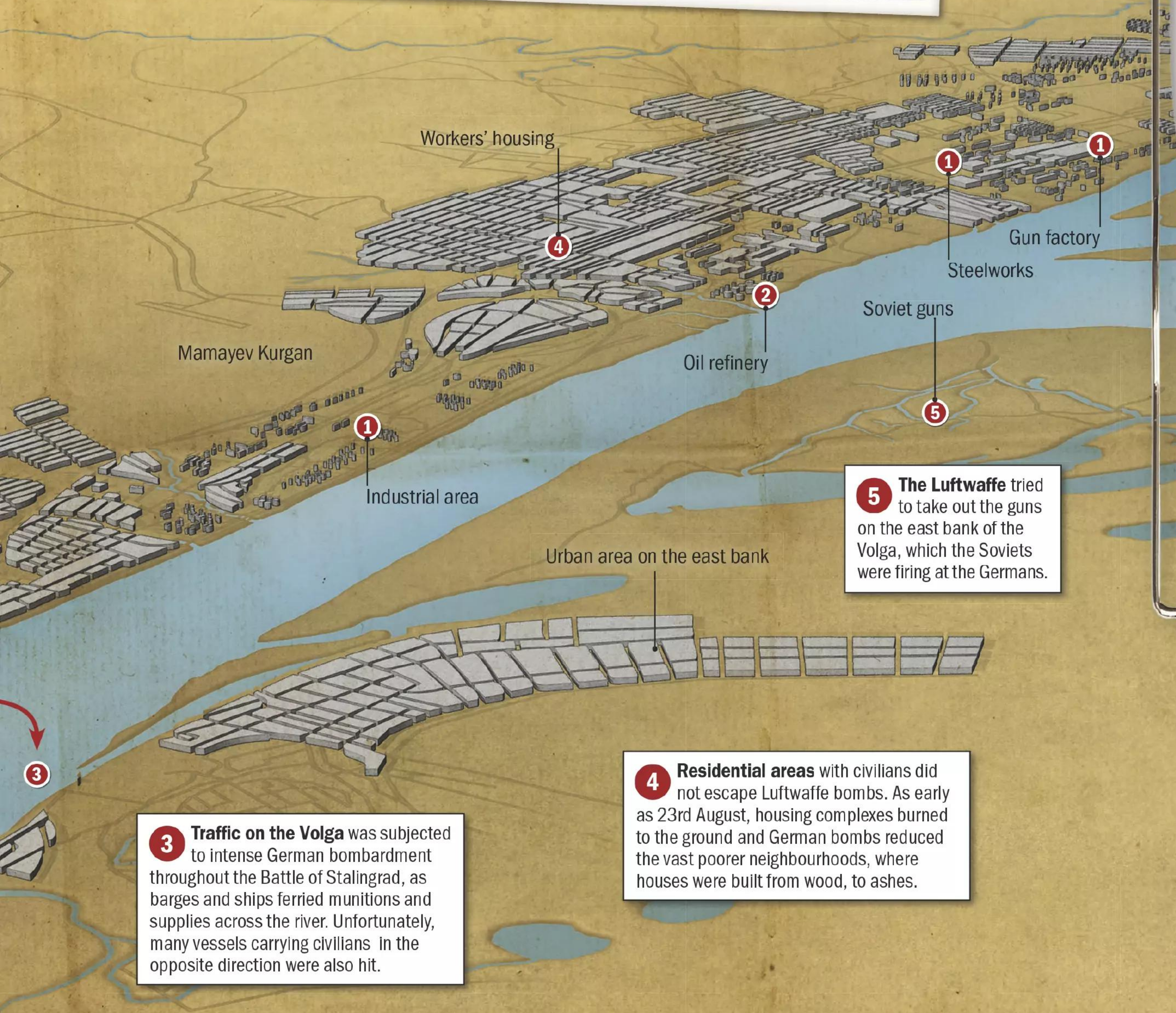
2 The oil refinery was so badly hit on 23rd August that a fireball 500 metres high rose from the plant. In the days that followed, the black column of smoke could be seen over 300 km away. Stalingrad's defence chief, General Yeremenko, witnessed burning oil flowing in streams down towards the Volga to set barges and boats on fire, as roads melted in a "whirl of heat and smoke".

A thick blanket of flak from Soviet anti-aircraft guns was Stalingrad's only answer to the air attacks.





The city's sewers became home to the citizens of Stalingrad as the Germans began their bombardment.





General Wolfram von Richthofen left cities including Guernica, Warsaw, Sevastopol and Stalingrad bombed in his wake.

decisions. Even as the Germans launched their first air raids in the summer of 1942, the 41-year-old Novikov was busy reforming the air force so that by late autumn his pilots would be far better able to tackle the superior enemy in the skies.

Novikov ordered that the uncoordinated attacks must stop and reconnaissance of enemy positions must be more thorough before bombers were deployed. The general directed the operation in close cooperation with Moscow and established a new efficient communication network between the Red Army and its pilots. Experts were sent to the front, where they set up radio systems and trained the army in their use, so that foot soldiers could make radio contact with the planes. Almost overnight, communication became lightning fast, allowing Soviet fighter pilots to promptly receive new briefings, attack orders or intelligence on where enemy tanks or aircraft were mobilising.

After Novikov's reorganisation, Soviet bombing raids were increasingly carried out at night, making it more difficult for enemy fighters. Air force pilots were trained in night flying, and a new formation, heavily inspired by the Luftwaffe, was also included in pilot training. Myriads of aircraft were rolling out

of the factories, but production alone couldn't sustain the Soviet Air Force. The Red Army had a rapidly growing need for new pilots. So Novikov cut the training period from years to months.

On the other hand, pilots become noticeably more proficient after Novikov's reforms, and many of them ended up receiving the Order of the Red Banner for their bravery in the air. Luftwaffe pilots noticed the change during the war:

"The Soviet pilots did get better over time. In fact, the famous Red Banner units had some of the best pilots in the world," said Johannes Steinhoff, who was on the Eastern Front from 1941.

Gulf between air forces closed

Luftwaffe pilots continued to shoot down hundreds of Soviet aircraft, but the Germans could no longer ignore their own casualties. Not least because the Soviet formations often hid a fanatical Communist who, even in hopelessly outnumbered situations, attacked without regard for their own survival. The most self-sacrificing Soviet pilots were willing to deliberately blow up German aircraft. On 14th September, when young Soviet Yak-1 pilot I M Chumbarev spotted a ►



Armoured bomber became pilots' favourite

The Soviet Air Force loved its new Il-2 plane because a layer of armour plating protected the pilots far better than other Soviet aircraft. With the fighter-bomber on the wing, the Red Army had a trump card on the Eastern Front.

The Soviet Air Force's favourite aircraft, the Ilyushin Il-2 Shturmovik, went by many names. Its designer called it a "flying tank", the ground troops "hunchback", and the pilots "Ilyusha" – "little Ilyushin" – after its designer, Sergey Ilyushin. German troops, on the other hand, who found the IL-2 hard to shoot down, dubbed it the "concrete bomber". Soviet

pilots adored the aircraft, which went into production in 1941.

"It was an excellent aircraft for those times! Carried 600 kilograms of bombs, eight rockets, 300 23-mm shells and 1,800 rounds for each machine gun," enthused pilot Yuri Khukhrikov.

A hybrid between a fighter and a heavily armed bomber, the Shturmovik was designed

to attack ground targets such as tanks, freight trains and airfields. The Il-2 could also hunt German transport aircraft and heavy bombers. Stalin equated the production of the Il-2 with the production of grain as the planes flowed off the conveyor belts. Around 35,000 were produced by 1945 – more than any other fighter aircraft during the war.

ARMOUR PLATES: The aircraft was extra carefully protected with armoured plates on the front where its fuel system, radiators and cockpit were located.

CREW: The aircraft had only one pilot in the early machines used over Stalingrad in the autumn of 1942. From 1943, a machine-gunner sat wedged in behind the pilot. The gunner's job was to shoot down attacking fighters.

COLOUR: Il-2s were coloured white for use in the snowy landscape of the winter months. The rest of the year they were painted camouflage colours.

MACHINE GUN: The bullets from the fighter-bomber's 37-mm machine gun were so powerful that they could penetrate a tank's armour.



ENGINE: With a water-cooled Mikulin V12 engine, the machine could reach a top speed of 414 km/h.

TAG: The pilots liked to write slogans on the side of the plane, such as "death to the fascist occupier".

The real thing was very different. They came back crying their eyes out. They were ready to drop. ■ Pilot Horst Ramstetter explained how Stalingrad shattered morale.

reconnaissance plane, he flew his own nose directly into the rear of the enemy at an altitude of 1,000 metres. The German aircraft crashed to the ground, while Chumbarev, impressively retained control of his fighter, which he landed safely in his own territory.

A downed Luftwaffe plane wasn't replaced, while Soviet factories churned out ever-increasing numbers of aircraft. Production of one new model was ramped up in particular: the rugged Ilyushin Il-2 Shturmovik fighter-bomber, known as the flying tank.

"Our Red Army now needs Il-2 aircraft like the air it breathes, like the bread it eats... I ask you not to try the government's patience, and demand that you manufacture more IIs. This is my final warning," Stalin threatened one aircraft factory, which was failing to meet the Soviet leader's strict demands. Unsurprisingly, production increased.

In September, Stalin also ordered all air forces be deployed to help Stalingrad, and a whole new air army was sent to the South-eastern Front. The Soviets now had 738 aircraft, and by late autumn the balance of power in the skies tipped as they suddenly had more aircraft in the air than the Germans. Luftwaffe supremacy crumbled – Heinrich Einsiedel found it hard to comprehend what was happening – not least because his respect for the enemy pilots remained lacking.

"How they managed this in view of such losses was a mystery to me, and even a greater mystery when one saw the captured Soviet pilots who, as a

rule, had such dull and primitive faces," Einsiedel wrote. The same frustration gradually set in with the Luftwaffe's regional commander-in-chief, the formerly brash Wolfram von Richthofen.

"We have not been able to master the Russian fighters absolutely and, of course, the Russians can attack our forward airfields any time they like," he conceded.

Not only were the Soviets attacking more and more German aircraft on the ground at the makeshift airstrips built by the Luftwaffe on parched fields, they were also targeting established airfields captured by the Germans with increasing success. One September evening, Lieutenant Anatoly Kojevnikov attacked a facility near the town of Rossosh, where several Heinkel He 111 bombers had been rolled out for an evening sortie.

"Our machine guns razed the airfield, as bombs from our Shturmovik sent fountains of earth into the air and destroyed enemy aircraft. Burning aviation fuel scattered on the ground, and a black cloud of smoke billowed up from a fuel tank to obscure the horizon. Enemy anti-aircraft guns stood no chance and were wiped out early in the attack. As our fighters strafed the airfield, we failed to spot eight Messerschmitts arriving. But just as Lieutenant Kudinov rose from a dive, he saw a plane with a cross and swastika underneath. Instinctively he pressed the fire button and saw flashes of fire ... after which the enemy plane crashed to the ground," Kojevnikov recalled. The Germans had to admit that they had lost precious

Soviets flew into German planes to force them down. Here, a sergeant survived the deliberate ramming.



aircraft, while the Soviet lieutenant's unit flew away from the successful raid with no casualties. The victory was a small harbinger that the tide was turning.

Germans lost their momentum

Although the Soviets enjoyed success as early as September 1942, it was not until late autumn that the Germans begin to really feel the effects of air resistance. Not only did the enemy have more planes in the skies, they were also displaying more boldness and intelligence. Little by little, fear crept into the Luftwaffe pilots' minds.

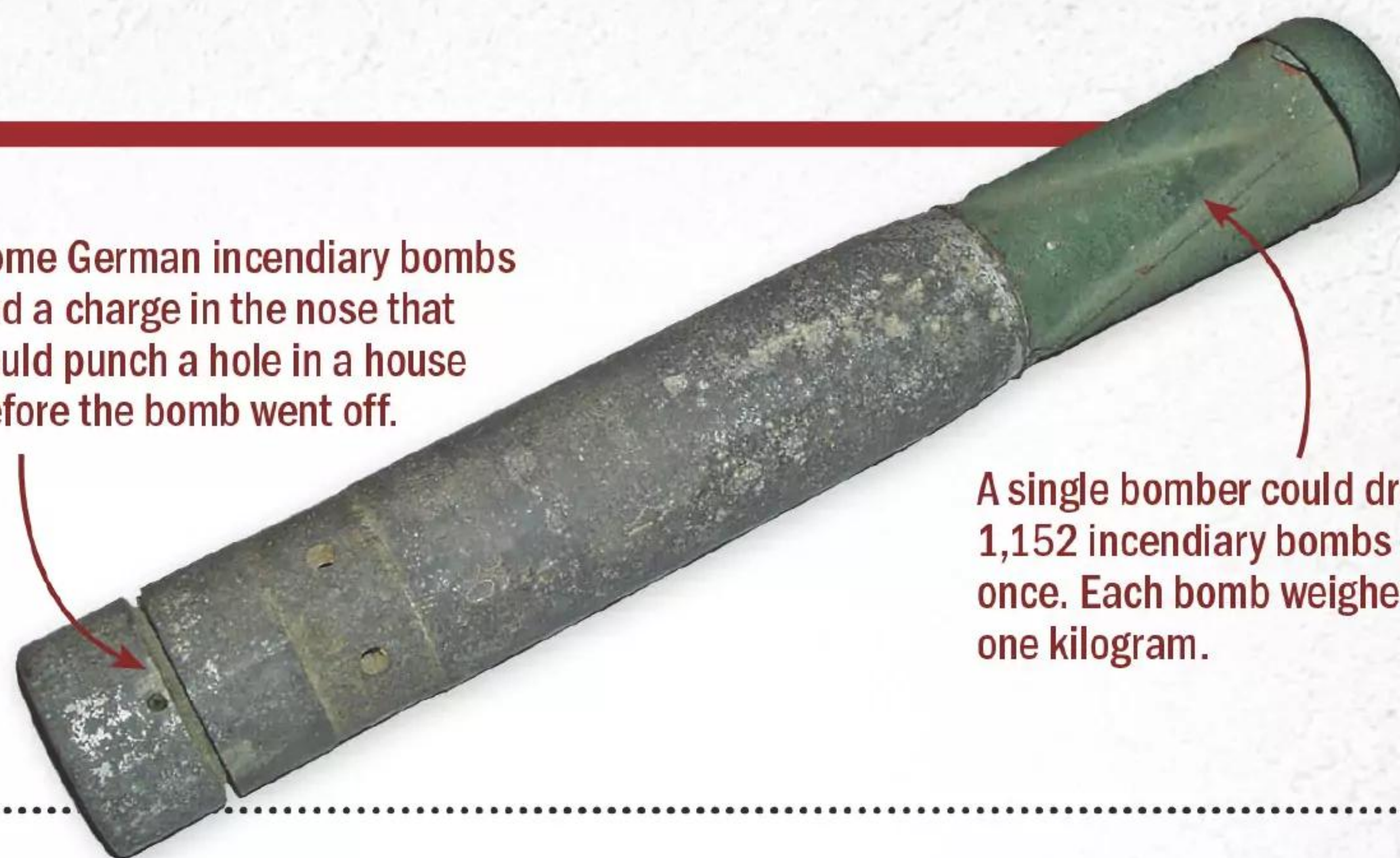
"It's a terrible moment when you see six planes flying towards you at the same time. It was terrifying. We didn't know what was going to happen," recalled Detlef Radbruch.

Newly arrived young German pilots were in for a shock when they found out that the skies on the Eastern Front were no longer a glorious place to be.

"When our advance on Stalingrad began, everyone said, great, we're moving, marching, everything's fine. Then they realised too late that the Russians had no intention of losing," wrote Horst Ramstetter. *"Some of the pilots were only 18 and had never flown a mission. They'd had their heads filled with 'Führer, Volk and Vaterland — we'll storm onwards, we heroes will win the war!' But the real thing was very different. They came back crying their eyes out."*

Ramstetter himself experienced how death waited behind every cloud during a fighter mission behind

Some German incendiary bombs had a charge in the nose that could punch a hole in a house before the bomb went off.



A single bomber could drop 1,152 incendiary bombs at once. Each bomb weighed one kilogram.

enemy lines: *"I was flying an FW 190, and discovered a Russian train loaded with war materiel,"* he recalled. *"We attacked and destroyed the engine, but my aircraft received a massive hit and I had to make an emergency landing. I came down behind the Russian lines... I got out of the plane, saw a cornfield and ran into it. I heard the troops rolling past somewhere in the distance and I said to myself: 'If the Russians should come now, you've got seven or eight rounds in your gun. You can try to get the Ivans with seven of them and the last one you've got left will be for yourself.' But I thought again and said: 'Nothing doing! I'm not going to kill myself.' I had my compass with me and knew in which direction I had to go. I set off, always keeping myself hidden. On the second night I arrived at a German border position on the front line. I swam across a river and ran across a field and shouted, 'Don't shoot! I'm a German pilot!' But just as I reached the position safely, a Russian fighter-bomber appeared and dived down on us. Everyone threw themselves to the ground and some men jumped on top of me. They saved my life. They were hit by shrapnel, but I survived."*

The growing German catastrophe at Stalingrad accelerated when the Luftwaffe was forced to move air units to the Mediterranean, where fighting had also flared up. At the same time, aircraft production could not keep up with or match that of the Soviets. Combined with increasing numbers of lost aircraft, the situation naturally started to get to the pilots, as Petty Officer R Holzer reported after being captured:

"The morale of flight personnel in my unit, which had been high at the time of our arrival at the front, was considerably undermined by the strikes. First and foremost, most of the flight crews were left without aircraft. Secondly, everyone realised that war in Russia was anything but a walkover, and that both ground and air units were suffering losses."

The Luftwaffe's initial successes left Stalingrad shattered. But rather than pave the way for German victory, the pilots had created a hellish landscape in which their countrymen must now fight. The nightmare had only just begun — for both sides. ■

AT THE SAME TIME

FRANCE/DIEPPE:

- An Allied landing ends in disaster.

POLAND/STANISLAU:

- German soldiers brutalise and execute 1,000 Jews.

USSR/MOSCOW:

- Churchill tells Stalin that D-Day will not be carried out in 1942, as the Soviets hoped.





The Soviets swarmed out of every corner of Stalingrad like rats, according to the German troops. It was the only way to fight in the shattered city.

Stalingrad, autumn 1942

Can we really have
lost so many men?
God damn this
Stalingrad.

Soldier Wilhelm Hoffman on the sight of German crosses in the city.

RAT WAR IN THE RUINS

Rat war in the ruins

As German troops stormed Stalingrad on 13th September, it soon became clear that the operation would be more difficult than expected. Among the city's fortifications of rubble and twisted steel, the Soviets fiercely defended every metre of ground. The soldiers called the bitter hand-to-hand fighting rat warfare.

By Troels Ussing

German panzer troops, confident of victory, were advancing towards Stalingrad in early September 1942. The industrial city had already been transformed into a smoking ruin. When General Friedrich Paulus and his 6th Army encircled the Soviet 62nd Army on 10th September, the odds were emphatically in Germany's favour. Only 20,000 Soviet troops remained in the city on the west bank of the Volga. They had fewer than 60 tanks, which were stuck in their positions because the rubble prevented the machines from moving.

Two days later, Hitler sent for Paulus, and the Führer was overjoyed when his loyal general showed up at Werwolf headquarters in Ukraine bearing good news. Paulus

stood ready with 170,000 men on the front line, and the force was accompanied by 500 tanks and 3,000 big guns and mortars. Since the 6th Army had crossed the Don River on 23rd August, Paulus's troops had stormed forward, destroying 350 guns and 830 tanks, and taking 26,500 Soviet prisoners. The general, eager to please his leader, estimated that Stalingrad could be taken in ten days. With a raised arm and a "*Heil!*" Paulus took leave of Hitler and flew back to the front to make final preparations for the attack on the industrial city. A preliminary bombardment by artillery and aircraft to destroy the Soviet positions was well under way. The shelling continued on 13th September as 6th Army panzer divisions and infantry advanced on the western outskirts of the



city. The men were confident of victory – even those far from the front:

“Here, everyone is awaiting the fall of Stalingrad,” read a letter to Paulus from a staff officer on sick leave in Germany, lamenting his inability to take part in the general’s impending triumph.

The staff officer, however, was more fortunate than he realised. Stalingrad had been so battered by Luftwaffe attacks that the troops couldn’t see where the roads were, and it soon dawned on the generals that they had shot themselves in the foot. Their normally well-oiled blitzkrieg tactics were impossible in the pulverised city. Collapsed buildings and mountains of rubble made any hope of a quick German victory impossible. Instead, bitter hand-to-hand combat awaited in factories, cellars and sewers. Soon, every soldier would want to leave Stalin’s city.

Soviets sacrificed themselves

Vasily Chuikov had only just been put in charge of the Soviet 62nd Army when the Germans launched its attack on Stalingrad’s suburbs on 13th September. The square-jawed Soviet had promised his superiors at the front, Andrey Yeremenko and Nikita Khrushchev, that he would let his troops die defending the city on the Volga riverbank. The hard-boiled general kept his word, and his men immediately paid the price. Divided into 35-man platoons, they fortified the streets to keep the enemy away from the important waterfront.

“On the 14th, when [the Germans] came into the city, they were getting ready to celebrate. But

these detached divisions put them in their place and pushed them back from the riverbank. They’d broken through to the crossing. ... We had to at least clear out the landing area. We threw everything at them. The enemy got pushed back to the train station. Everyone stayed in line to the last man,” recalled Chuikov of the initial defence, which cost many lives but also ensured that General Alexander Rodimtsev’s skilled guardsmen reached the Volga in time.

“We made it so two of Rodimtsev’s regiments could make the crossing safely. They entered the battle from the moment they disembarked at the landing. They didn’t know where they were or what was happening; they didn’t know whether it was night or day. But we had a sense that the enemy was being reckless, that they were coming at us without taking any precautions whatsoever. Our divisions were small, but we kept at it, we kept cutting them down. We still had plenty of ammunition. All the ammo dumps were here. During those three days we took out a huge number of enemy tanks. We lost a lot. They got all our guns and crews, but there was nothing we could have done. Everyone knew we had no right to pull back. ... The men knew that they had to fight to the last for Stalingrad. ... Everyone knew that those who ran would be shot on the spot. That was more terrifying than the Germans,” wrote Chuikov.

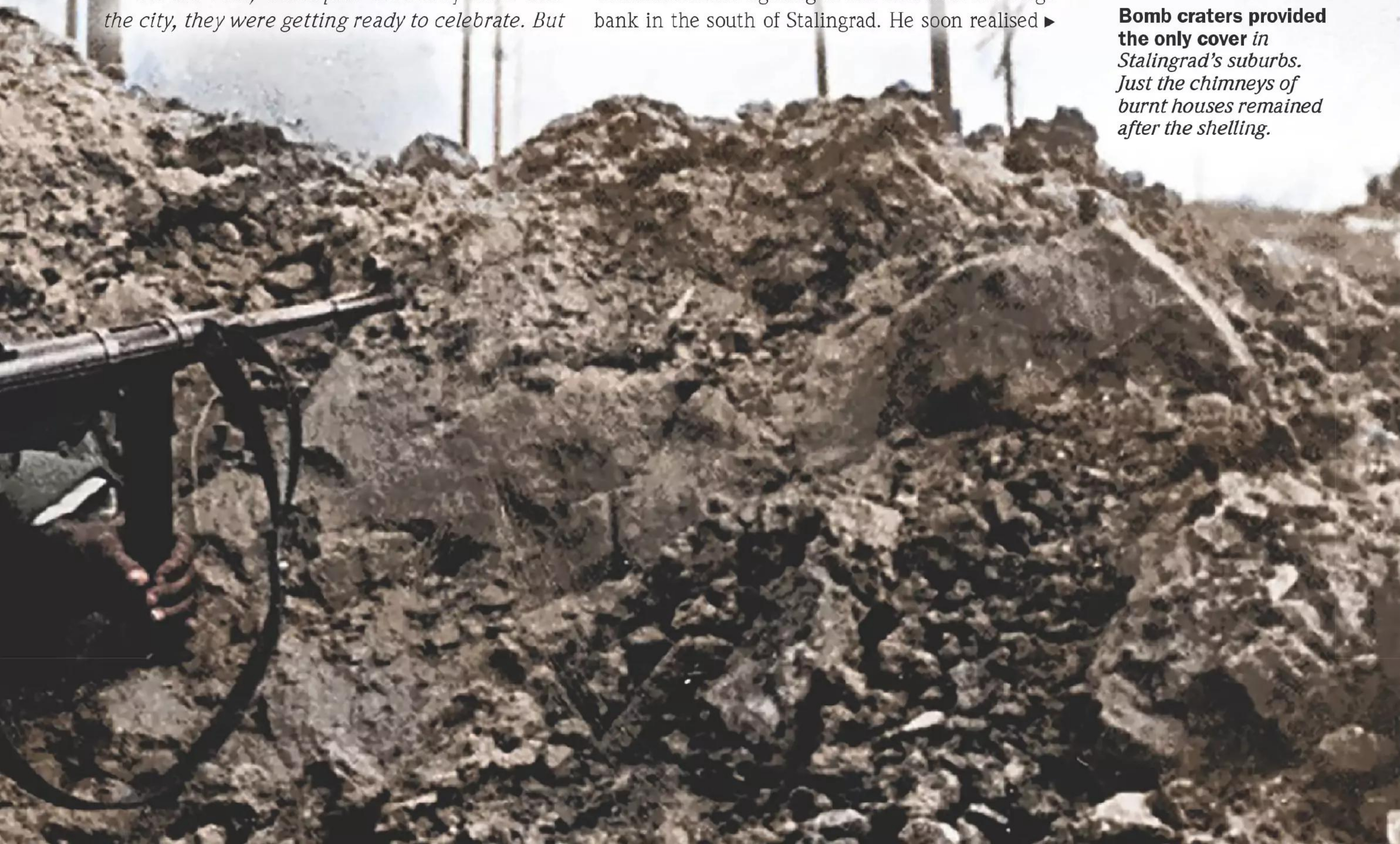
Infantryman Wilhelm Hoffman was one of the German soldiers fighting in the area near the Volga bank in the south of Stalingrad. He soon realised ►

The Soviet spade was designed to dig trenches.



In Stalingrad, the spade’s blade was used as a mêlée weapon.

Bomb craters provided the only cover in Stalingrad’s suburbs. Just the chimneys of burnt houses remained after the shelling.





In a bombed-out grain silo (left), 50 Soviets stand their ground. After the battle, the building was close to collapse, but continues to remain standing to this day.

they were up against a savage enemy, ready to sacrifice his life.

"The Russians fight with the desperation of wild beasts; they won't allow themselves be taken prisoner, but instead let you come close and then they throw grenades ... They are fatalists, fanatics," Hoffman wrote in his diary, where he also noted that *"everywhere you look there is fire and flames"*.

On 16th September, as part of the German 94th Infantry Division, Hoffman was ordered to attack a cluster of large grain silos south of the waterfront. The Soviets enjoy good views from the top of the eight-storey edifices, and fired machine guns at the enemy through small windows. Hoffman's battalion, however, was supported by tanks, which wove their way over the rubble in the streets to attack the large concrete structures.

"Our battalion is attacking the silo with tanks. Smoke is pouring out of it. The grain is burning and it seems that the Russians inside set fire to it themselves. It's barbaric. The battalion is taking heavy losses. Those are not people in the silo, they are devils and neither fire nor bullets can

touch them," Hoffman wrote in despair. One of the diabolical enemies in the silos was marine Andrei Khozyainov. The Soviet had nearly 60 men under his command at the facility and had orders to *"hold it at all costs"*.

"We had two Maxim guns, one light machine gun, two anti-tank rifles, three tommy guns and a radio set. ... We were very careful with our ammunition, as it was a long way to bring up more, and a difficult trip. In the silo the grain was on fire, and the water in the machine guns evaporated. The wounded kept asking for something to drink, but there was no water nearby. This was how we defended our position, day and night. Heat, thirst, smoke – everybody's lips were cracked. During the day many of us climbed up to the high points in the silo and from there fired on the Germans, especially at their snipers. At night we came down and made a defensive ring. Our radio set had been put out of action on the first day of battle, so we had no contact with our units."

Khozyainov's men held out for days. They had to urinate on their machine guns to cool them down,

Those are not people in the silo, they are devils and neither fire nor bullets can touch them. ■ Soldier Wilhelm Hoffman on the Soviets' fighting spirit.

but by 20th September, the ammunition boxes were empty.

"Around noon, 12 enemy tanks came up from the south and west. To our dismay, we had already run out of ammunition for our anti-tank rifles, and we also had no grenades left. The tanks approached the silo from two sides and began to fire at our garrison almost at point-blank range. We continued to fire ... at the enemy infantry to stop them from entering the silo. ... Concrete was raining down on us after each explosion, and the grain was in flames. Even at a metre's distance, we could not see one another for dust and smoke. ... On the west side of the silo, the Germans managed in spite of us to enter the building, but we immediately covered the areas they had occupied with gunfire. Fighting raged inside the building. We were so close to the enemy that we could feel and hear their breath, their every movement, but we could not see them. We fired at noises," Khozyainov reported.

By nightfall, the Soviets had run out of ammunition, and Khozyainov decided that the few remaining men had no choice but to flee. The exhausted soldiers found a pocket between the Germans' tanks and troops, and sneaked away in the dark to safety.

"We were faint with thirst. 'Something to drink! Something to drink!' was all we could think. We drank our fill in the darkness," Khozyainov recalled.

The next morning, Wilhelm Hoffman and his compatriots arrived. They were stunned by how many comrades they'd lost in the battle for the silo – especially as enemy casualties were surprisingly few.

"We found about 40 corpses in the silo. About half of them are sailors – sea devils, they are. We took one prisoner. He's badly wounded and can't speak, or pretends he can't. Our battalion is now reduced to less than the ordinary complement of a company. None of our old soldiers can remember fighting as barbarous as this," Hoffman wrote bitterly.

Hilltop bathed in soldiers' blood

While Hoffman and Khozyainov fought at the silo, fighting broke out at every strategic position in the ruins. The 102-metre hill of Mamayev Kurgan, about five kilometres north of the city centre, was a particular focus. The group holding the hill had a view of the city and the Volga, where barges carried soldiers and supplies to Chuikov's beleaguered troops.

"From this dominating height one could control almost the whole city and the shipping on the Volga. It had been ploughed over by bombs and shells and richly soaked in blood," was the description of German soldier Josef Goblirsch, who participated in several attacks on Mamayev Kurgan in September.

Goblirsch's regiment suffered "heavy losses" to Soviet fire but advanced only a few metres. When the

Germans captured parts of the hill, the Soviets gave them no quarter. Chuikov sacrificed his men without blinking, as they savagely attacked to prevent the Germans from setting up artillery. Company commander Nikolai Maznitsa of the 95th Rifle Division was among those who had to charge up Mamayev Kurgan with only shell holes for protection.

"The hill would come alive again like a volcano and we would crawl out of the shell holes and put our machine guns to work. The barrels of the guns were red-hot and the water boiled inside them. ... The slopes of the Kurgan were completely covered in corpses. In some places you had to move two or three dead bodies aside to lie down. They quickly began to decompose and the stench was appalling, but you just had to lie down and pay no attention. ... Sometimes it seemed that like we were all condemned to death," said the commander, who almost paid the ultimate price on 23rd September:

"I was buried in my foxhole during an attack and was unconscious under the earth for several hours. When they dug me out, they took my documents away as evidence of my death, and they were about to bury me ... when a bomb blast threw me several metres and somehow brought me round. ... I retook command of my company that same day."

Maznitsa's soldiers fought for 11 days at Mamayev Kurgan before a fresh unit relieved them. The battle for the hill was in a deadlock for months, with the Germans mainly holding the western slopes. The Red Army stubbornly clung to the crucial eastern slopes, which guarded and protected the 62nd Army's lifeline across the Volga, the already struggling river traffic.

Volga was vital to war's outcome

The Volga was not just the heart of the Soviet Union. During the Battle of Stalingrad, the river was the ►

FACTS

The Soviet counter-attacks in Stalingrad slowed the German advance, but cost dearly in lives; **30% of the 13th Guards Rifle Division** died within 24 hours of being in the city. Only 320 out of 10,000 soldiers survived the battle.

VASILY CHUIKOV (1900-1982)

The son of a peasant, Chuikov enjoyed respect, thanks to his stature and strength. He won the high regard of privates by staying with them at the front. The general served as military advisor to Chiang Kai-shek in China in 1941, far from the horrors of the new Eastern Front. In 1942, Chuikov was brought in as a breath of fresh air to reverse the smouldering failure of Stalingrad.



lifeblood of the Red Army. The influx of new soldiers and supplies across the river could only just keep the war machine fed, enabling the 62nd Army to hold the city's front line. Every vessel's journey across the 1.5-kilometre-wide river was therefore crucial for Chuikov, his troops and the fate of the Soviet Union. Troops, weapons, ammunition and supplies were transported on barges, cutters, rowing boats and steamers. The ships operated almost exclusively after nightfall, when conditions for Luftwaffe aircraft were more difficult than during the day.

"The crossing operates from 18.00 until 04.30," [one of the men said]. 'We camouflage [the boats], bringing them under cover of the bank and trees. The steam pinnacle Donbass is hidden inside a destroyed

barge. ... It's very hard when there's a moon. It's beautiful, but damn the beauty," reported journalist Vasily Grossman.

At the crossing points on the eastern side of the Volga, the Soviets had set up field kitchens with ovens dug into the earth that made hot food, which was transported across the river in insulated boxes. Weapons and ammunition were also taken as secretly as possible across the river, where Grossman saw the boxes being unloaded while *"smoke canisters are burned constantly to camouflage the crossing"*.

The correspondent also observed the troops taking their places along the bank, with a one-way ticket to hell. They could see the city smoking on the opposite side and hear the shots and shells ringing out into the

MACHINE GUN



PPSh-41

Bullets rained from copied machine gun

The combination of pistol ammunition and machine gun firing rate made the Soviet machine guns ideal for street fighting in Stalingrad. But the compact firearms were an invention the Soviets had stolen from another enemy.

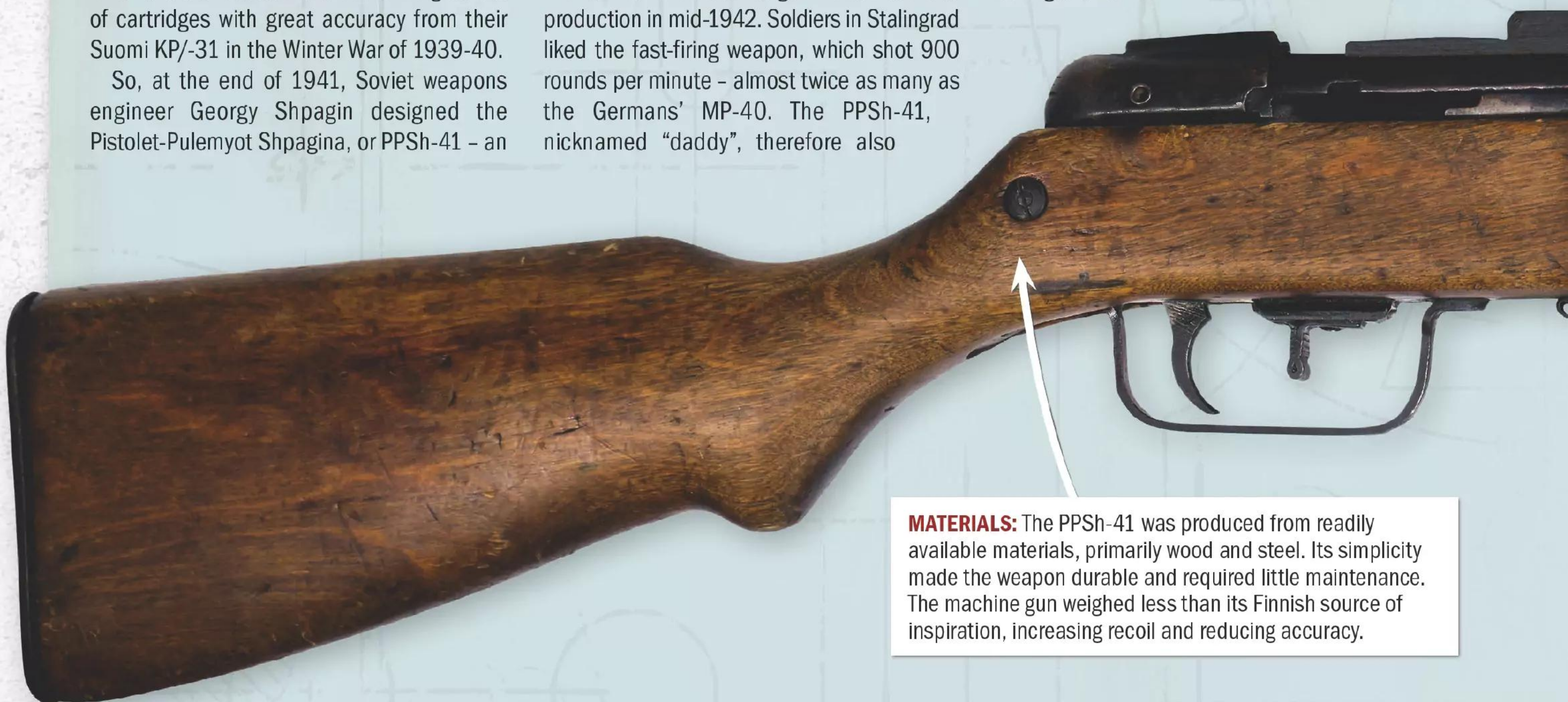
In the Soviet Union, the modern machine gun of the 1930s was not considered very useful. But attitudes changed completely when the Soviets saw the Finns firing bursts of cartridges with great accuracy from their Suomi KP/-31 in the Winter War of 1939-40.

So, at the end of 1941, Soviet weapons engineer Georgy Shpagin designed the Pistolet-Pulemyot Shpagina, or PPSH-41 – an

almost faithful replica of the Finnish submachine gun. The model's clear advantage was that it was cheap and easy to produce.

The PPSH-41 machine gun went into mass production in mid-1942. Soldiers in Stalingrad liked the fast-firing weapon, which shot 900 rounds per minute – almost twice as many as the Germans' MP-40. The PPSH-41, nicknamed "daddy", therefore also

became popular with Soviet soldiers when fighting in the streets and factories. The Soviets produced about six million of them during the war.



MATERIALS: The PPSH-41 was produced from readily available materials, primarily wood and steel. Its simplicity made the weapon durable and required little maintenance. The machine gun weighed less than its Finnish source of inspiration, increasing recoil and reducing accuracy.

**In some places you had to move two or three dead bodies
aside to lie down. ■ Company Commander Nikolai Maznitsa on Mamayev Kurgan.**

night. Soon they would be fighting in the ruins. But the boat trip was as dangerous as the city battles.

"The crossing was under constant fire. The riverbank was ironed flat. It was being shelled the whole time," said Chuikov.

Both aircraft and artillery threatened the crossing. Artillerymen lit up the river with flares and fired shells at anything that moved on the water. The Soviet soldiers were terrified as they boarded the boats, scrambling up the railing so they could jump into the water if the boat was hit. Officers removed the men, noted machine-gunner Aleksandr Gordeev, as his comrades reluctantly went into the hold.

"The officers made them move down by kicking them, NCOs were swearing and shouting. Baida [his

petty officer] and two big sailors were grabbing men who resisted and pushing them down the ladder. Crates of shells, bullets and rations were brought aboard. Looking at the stack of ammunition boxes five steps from our Maxim gun, I could imagine what would happen if they were hit," recalled Gordeev, who became even more alarmed when a ferry full of wounded Soviets heading in the opposite direction was hit: *"There was a general, continuous howling sound that swelled above the bomb explosions."*

Grossman saw hundreds of vessels destroyed, and through interviews with survivors, the correspondent recreated some of the horrors of the Soviet infantry:

"Men on the barges, ferries and motorboats were silent. ... Suddenly, a tall and thin bluish-white ►

AMMUNITION: Almost all WWII machine guns used 9 x 19-mm ammunition, but the PPSH-41 was designed to use 7.62 x 25-mm Tokarev cartridges, a considerably more powerful munition that could be used at longer distances. Soviet machine guns could fire up to 200 metres.

Tokarev cartridges were used in Soviet pistols and were a replica of German bullets.

SIGHT: An adjustable sight could be set for targets at either 100 or 200 metres.

MAGAZINE: A drum magazine with 71 cartridges clicked on to the barrel, but in a packed magazine, the cartridges risked jamming. The drum also provided poor grip for two hands. After 1942, the PPSH-41 could be fitted with a 35-round curved magazine, which provided better grip and reliability.

STRENGTH RATIO

As the battle for Stalingrad peaked, **the Soviets had**

1,143,000

soldiers at the front. On the German side there were

1,040,000

troops, of which about 50 percent were from Hungary, Italy and Romania.

column of water sprang up about 50 metres from the barge. Immediately after it another column grew and collapsed even closer, and then a third one. Bombs were exploding on the surface of the water, and the Volga was covered with lacerated foamy wounds; shells began to hit the sides of the barge. Injured men would cry out softly, as if trying to conceal the fact of being wounded. By then, rifle bullets had already started whistling over the water. There was one terrible moment when a large calibre shell hit the side of a small ferry. There was a flash of flame, dark smoke enveloped the ferry, an explosion was heard, and immediately afterwards, a drawling scream as if born from this thunder. Thousands of people saw immediately the green helmets of the men swimming among the wreckage of wood rocking on the surface of water," Grossman wrote, noting that the Volga was no longer the idyllic river it had once been.

"The quiet, clear Volga is terrifying like a scaffold," was the verdict from Grossman's pen. But those who survived the scaffold ended up in the slaughterhouse.

Soldiers fought in factory halls

Cadet Viktor Kartashev had been commissioned as a machine-gunner in the 193rd Rifle Division. He arrived at the Volga as one of thousands of young Soviets in late September to be taken by rowing boat to the factory areas at the northern end of Stalingrad, where the Germans were attacking in force.

"We went up to the water's edge, one platoon at a time. Four or five men climbed into each boat. Each one went 30 or 40 metres upstream, then crossed quickly to the opposite bank of the river, propelled by the powerful strokes of the experienced ferrymen. Several mortar shells plopped into the water behind us, bringing up a huge column of water. As soon as the boats reached the bank, we jumped into the water," recalled Kartashev, sailing on 27th September.

The industrial zone contained huge facilities, such as the Tractor Plant, which produced tanks, the Barrikady Factory, which made anti-tank guns, and the Red October steelworks. The factories were

labyrinthine complexes of large halls and smaller workshops. The Germans had been attacking the area since 13th September, but on 26th September, the Wehrmacht launched a major assault on the factories, which were still churning out equipment despite the fighting. The Soviets threw all their strength into defending the area, even though German tanks and artillery had demolished the factories. At Red October, Kartashev and his comrades fought for every metre.

"Our tunics were soaked in sweat and clinging to our backs. The grit was crunching in our teeth. ... We had to sling our guns over our shoulders when we moved, and that made it difficult for us to run. Bullets were whistling past, mortars were exploding, but we couldn't see the Germans at all. They had taken cover behind piles of rubble in wrecked buildings. ... Whenever we moved to new positions, I would immediately set about digging in," Kartashev wrote.

Soldiers on both sides struggled to find their bearings in the dust, so battles over tiny areas dragged on. After several days, Kartashev and a fellow soldier holed up in the basement of Red October. They held out, but Kartashev barely recognised his comrade:

"He was so dirty that his eyes and teeth seemed to sparkle against the grime which covered the rest of him, and his eyes had become sunken from too many sleepless nights. ... It was hard to stay awake: the sleepless nights were really taking their toll. My eyelids were getting heavier and heavier with every minute. ... We never took off our boots and would take it in turns to get some sleep, which we did with our weapons in our hands. We would put our helmets on and rest our heads against a brick."

Worst of all, however, was the meagre amount of water and provisions the soldiers received.

"In the basement there was some sort of half-collapsed pit with water in it. None of us knew what kind of water it was, but we were thirsty, so we had no choice but to drink it. ... [M]any of us got stomach upsets from drinking this water. It was very difficult getting food to us. ... Bread was sent in sacks, so we only got crusts and crumbs," Kartashev recalled.

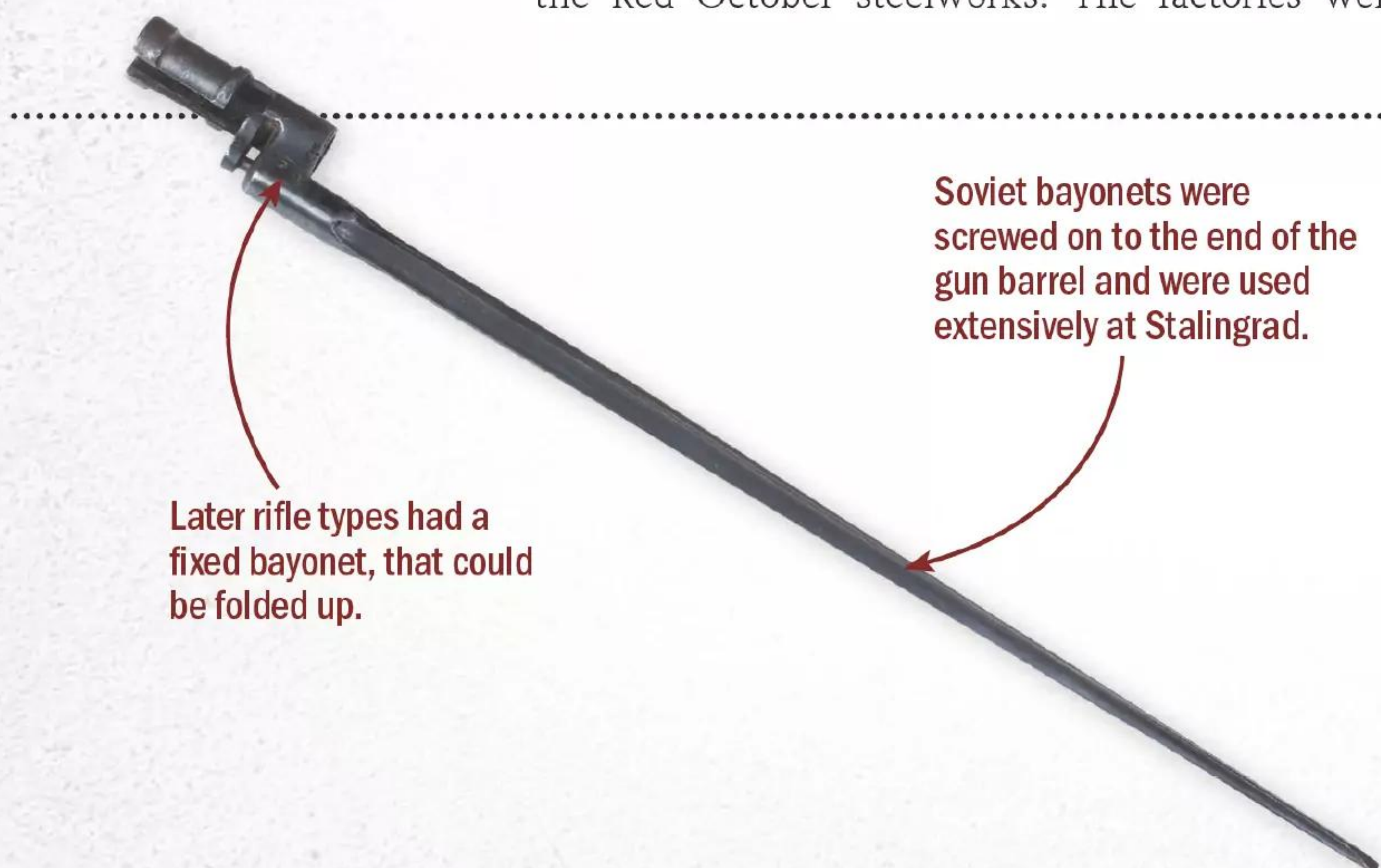
Many Soviet soldiers died in the factories, but German losses were just as great. On 2nd October, Wilhelm Hoffman was sent from the silos to the industrial area. On the same day, he noted in his diary, "In Stalingrad, anyone can die at any moment."

His morale did not improve during the fighting in the war-torn factory halls.

"We are in a new part of town for us. Though it is night, I can see many crosses with our helmets on top of them. Can we really have lost so many men? God damn this Stalingrad," he wrote.

Bomb hit Chuikov's headquarters

While soldiers in both camps dreamt of an end to the fighting, Hitler had other plans. As early as 30th ►



The mastermind behind the AK-47 got the idea for the iconic assault rifle in 1942 when he heard a compatriot complaining about his machine gun.

Mikhail Kalashnikov



Stalingrad was a school for snipers

During long expeditions in Stalingrad's ruins, the Soviet Union's most skilled snipers taught young Soviets to kill Germans from a distance. The training made death omnipresent for the enemy.

For Vasily Zaitsev, hunting had been a way of life since his childhood in the Ural Mountains. There he learned from a young age to kill prey to put meat on the table. When Zaitsev volunteered for the Stalingrad Front, he impressed army command by eliminating 40 German soldiers in just ten days. One-man warfare didn't come as easily to other young Soviets, so Zaitsev, only 27, was put in charge of training snipers in the city.

Zaitsev's students received theory and marksmanship training in a forge, then got hands-on experience in the art of killing during missions in the ruins. Among other things, they learned that if they took down too many victims from the same position, they'd expose their hiding place:

"As a rule, you would always be spotted by the time you had killed five

or six Fritzes from the same lair. The Germans would then usually try to flush you out with mortar or artillery fire," explained another sniper, Mikhail Mamekov. So, the students had to constantly move between hiding spots.

Zaitsev was also very aware that "when someone shoots in the dark you can see the flash clearly". That's why he spent night-time finding new hiding places and daylight hours lying with his rifle. According to star pupil Anatoly Chekhov, sunlight also caused problems: "When it was sunny, there was a shadow on the wall when I moved [so] I didn't shoot them when it was sunny," he said.

Over 250 lives were claimed by Vasily Zaitsev (left) with a sniper rifle. He was self-taught.

September, the Führer had proclaimed in a speech to Berliners that *"no human being shall ever push us away from that spot"*. Fourteen days later, Hitler cancelled all other operations on the Eastern Front, partly because the Germans had stalled in their search for oil in the Caucasus. Thus, the original objective of the 1942 offensive was finally dropped.

Instead, all efforts were to be focused on the capture of Stalingrad. On 14th October, the Luftwaffe attacked with renewed vigour, and Paulus sent four fresh battalions into the city – mainly against the factories to the north, where Chuikov was also headquartered. The Soviet commander remembered the day as the darkest of the whole battle:

"[T]hey were shelling and bombing us more than ever, we could hardly breathe. We stayed in our ravine. They bombed and shelled away, started fires. They knew our army's command post was there. And so were eight fuel tanks. Every one of them was leaking. Fuel flowed down into the dugout of our chief of artillery. Everything caught fire, and it was burning for a whole kilometre along the bank of the Volga. The fire lasted three days on end. We were afraid of being suffocated or being so poisoned by fumes that the enemy would be able to take us alive."

On 14th October alone, 61 Russians lost their lives in Chuikov's HQ. The general and his staff were subjected to such a massive bombardment that their soup *"came to the table with shell fragments in it"*.

When, after three days, Yermenko asked over the radio where exactly the army commander was in the chaos,



People think that urban warfare is a matter of walking down a street and shooting. That's nonsense. The streets are empty. ■ General Vasily Chuikov on how urban warfare was fought indoors.



Chuikov's answer was not reassuring: *"We're where the most flames and smoke are."*

However, Chuikov held out for three relentless days until General Ivan Lyudnikov's 138th Rifle Division was transported across the Volga and came to the aid of the hard-pressed Soviets in the factory area. People like Kartashev finally got a chance to rest. For a while, the Red Army had kept the enemy at bay. But German General Friedrich Paulus's troops pushed further north towards the Volga, capturing the Tractor Plant along the way. From the air, the German pilots couldn't comprehend how the soldiers on the ground continued to fight in the bombed-out city.

"I cannot understand how men can survive such a hell, yet the Russians sit tight in the ruins, and holes and cellars, and a chaos of steel skeletons which used to be factories," wrote pilot Herbert Pabst.

For the soldiers on the ground, it was frustrating that their superior might couldn't crush the Soviets.

"Factory walls, assembly lines, the whole superstructure collapses under the storm of bombs but the enemy reappears and utilises these newly created ruins to fortify his defensive positions," wrote German General Karl Strecker to a friend.

Strecker's complaint painted an accurate picture of the Germans' problem in Stalingrad. The rubble stopped the Nazis from trampling over the enemy.

Heavy guns played key role

German blitzkrieg tactics of combined air and ground attacks were a success on the plains of the Eastern Front. In September, the Germans still had the benefit of tanks in Stalingrad, but after a month of fighting and air strikes, every road had turned to rubble.

"After 14th October, the enemy tanks hadn't been able to operate because the terrain was too broken

up," said Chuikov. Indeed, German Panzer Major Rolf Grams found that the ruins and mines made life difficult for his tanks.

"[Our] tanks climbed mounds of rubble and scrap, and crept screeching through chaotically destroyed workshops and fired at point-blank range in narrow yards. Many of the tanks shook or exploded from the force of an exploding enemy mine," the major said.

The Red Army also began to lure the German tanks into traps. While the armoured vehicles fought their way through the streets, the Soviets hid in buildings or sewers, then stormed forward to fire anti-tank rifles at the machines from behind. Often, the tanks couldn't escape because it took too long to manoeuvre in the ruins. Other times, the Soviets threw Molotov cocktails at the tanks from the top of the buildings.

Tanks became less useful for both camps, and instead artillery took a larger role. Because Chuikov had limited space for heavy artillery between the shattered buildings on the west side, the commander withdrew all guns and howitzers larger than 76 mm to the east. The gun crews received coordinates by radio or field telephone from binocular-bearing artillery observers hiding in the buildings at the front. Then the batteries unleashed their full force.

"On the other side of the Volga, it seemed as if the whole universe shook with the mighty roaring of the heavy guns," wrote Vasily Grossman.

Meanwhile, the famous Katyusha rocket launchers constantly played their terrifying, howling tune, which had earned them the nickname Stalin organs.

"Continuing to move forward, we were repeatedly caught between the detonating Stalin organ rockets ... They had a depressing effect," said German Wigand Wüster. The Germans knew shells were coming whenever they heard the Stalin organ. As ►

With lives at stake, tugs and barges carried weapons and food to Stalingrad. The Volga River was the city's only supply line.

did the Soviets when the Stuka sirens wailed. Wüster led an artillery unit that used horses to move their 150-mm guns to positions from which they could fire on the enemy's defences. The unit followed scouts who found safe routes through the outskirts of the city. In October, Wüster's men were ordered to shell the factory buildings to the north.

"After carefully guiding in our shells, our 150-cm rounds tore holes in the thick brick walls. Nevertheless, levelling the building could not be contemplated. Only after several attempts, did our neighbours enter the factory ... [O]ur artillery support had to cease once our troops were inside. ... A minimum safe distance of 200 metres had to be kept because of straying shells," Wüster reported.

The Soviets quickly realised where the shells were coming from and turned their own artillery on the Germans. A wagon with six horses stood ready to quickly move the gun if the position was not hidden and reinforced with railway sleepers, concrete or other solid materials. These heavy guns played an important role but, according to Wüster, were never used in the centre of Stalingrad.

"We could not intervene in the actual house-to-house fighting. The hard work there was done with hand grenades and submachine guns, from one side of the street to the other, from house to house, from floor to floor and even from room to room. The Russians doggedly held on to the ruins of the city with a stubbornness that was beyond their already impressive fighting spirit and morale. They did this so effectively that we could barely make any further headway," explained Wüster, who considered himself lucky not to be among the soldiers who had to fight in the dirt and muck, like rats in the sewer.

Red Army breathed down enemy's neck

The Germans had so far counted their progress in kilometres, but in Stalingrad they measured their advance in metres. The army had little experience of street fighting and quickly learned that superior equipment offered no advantage in the ruins. Even their greater numbers were difficult to exploit against the Soviets, who barricaded themselves in the ruins.

"It was a terrible, exhausting battle, on and below the ground, in ruins, cellars and factory sewers. A battle of man against man," said Major Rolf Grams.

In reality, the Red Army had little experience of urban warfare either, but Vasily Chuikov soon worked out what was required. He introduced a tactic that ordered the Soviet infantry to *"hug the enemy"* by taking up positions close to the Germans. The strategy eliminated the possibility of air support because the Luftwaffe risked bombing its own.

"Sometimes, the trenches dug by the battalion are 20 metres from the enemy. The sentry can hear soldiers walking in the German trench and▶

FACTS

Mamayev Kurgan was so ravaged by the battle that every square metre was covered by

500-1,250

bullets and bomb fragments. For a year after, no grass could grow on the mound.



25/9

The train station in Stalingrad falls after ten days of fighting. On the first day, it changes hands 14 times in six hours.

17/10

Mamayev Kurgan is taken. However, the Soviets continue to attack and shell it, stopping the enemy using the ridge militarily.

1/11

The Soviets stand in a factory hall in the Red October steelworks, the heart of the industrial city. The Germans abandon the assault.

Soviet nurses patch up soldiers in the ruins. *In the Red Army, both women and men filled the role.*



HOW...

...civilians survived among the rubble

Stalingrad's remaining inhabitants lived in cellars, sewers and holes as history's worst battles unfolded in the city. Shelling, cold and hunger were an ever-present threat to civilian life.

While everyone knew that war was approaching, some 150,000 civilians were in Stalingrad when German troops attacked on 13th September 1942. Many residents had fled after the Luftwaffe bombings in August, but just as many elderly people, factory workers, women and children stayed because they didn't want to leave everything they owned behind. Others remained because of the risks of leaving during the coming winter, when cold and disease were major hazards.

"I could have got out of the city, but all my children were sick at the time," said cook Agrafena Pozdnyakova, who lost her husband and two of her six children to artillery during the fighting.

Pozdnyakova saw her home wrecked by bombs and shells. She sought shelter in cellars, sewers and holes in the rubble with her children. Many also

sought refuge along the Volga, digging caves in the steep banks. The sight shocked a Soviet commander:

"I shall never forget the scene that opened out before me. This gully, which stretched to my left and right, swarmed with life, just like an anthill dotted with caves. Entire streets had been excavated on either side. The mouths of the caves were covered with charred boards and rags. The women had utilised everything that could be of service. ... [T]he struggle being waged is for life or death," he wrote.

In October, the Germans ordered civilians on long marches to camps in the west, but 15,000 hid in Stalingrad throughout the battle. They were exposed to German and Soviet artillery, but many died of cold and starvation. The survivors coped by eating dead animals and stealing wheat from German depots that eventually ran out.

Joseph Stalin refused to evacuate Stalingrad. The inhabitants had to remind the soldiers what they were fighting for.

arguments when Germans divide up the food. He can hear all night the tap dance of a German sentry in his torn boots. ... They [Soviet soldiers] can build trenches that are so good that you wouldn't notice soldiers in them even if you step on their heads," Chuikov reported during the battle.

The general also established storm groups – small units of eight to 20 men – that boldly stormed buildings that were in German hands.

"We didn't just receive attacks, we had to attack," Chuikov pointed out. *"People think that urban warfare is a matter of walking down a street and shooting. That's nonsense. The streets are empty and the fighting is going on in the buildings, in structures and courtyards where you've got to pluck the enemy out with bayonets and grenades. For those fights, our men love the Fenya, which is what they call our hand grenade."*

In addition to their Fenya, the assault groups were equipped with machine guns, flamethrowers, knives and spades that could be used to crush skulls. The storm groups' favourite tactic was to blast a hole in a wall with an anti-tank gun, then the soldiers would surge forward and throw grenades through the hole. Basements were cleared with more grenades. Before entering a room, a soldier threw in a Fenya and shot through the smoke with his machine gun. Alternatively, a soldier with a flamethrower turned the room into a furnace. Some preferred to attack the enemy with knives when space was tight in narrow corridors or small rooms.

"This kind of close combat is unlike anything else. Once you are inside a building a machine gun is no longer any use, there is no time to load it, and no room to use it effectively. Knives and small, sharp spades are the best weapons for storm group fighting – it is all about physical toughness and quick reflexes," wrote a Soviet soldier.

Many buildings had to be taken room by room. Some soldiers said it was *"like a layered cake"*, when the Germans defended themselves on the middle floors of a house, while the Soviets stormed in from the ground floor and the roof at the same time. Chuikov constantly sent storm groups out at night to keep the enemy at bay. The German soldiers hated the chaotic warfare, which didn't follow traditional military code. Their will was worn down by never knowing where the enemy was. Thus, Chuikov's plan that *"every German must be made to feel that he was living under the muzzle of a Russian gun"* worked to perfection.

The Germans called this type of fighting



Knives and small, sharp spades are the best weapons for storm group fighting – it is all about physical toughness and quick reflexes. ■ Unknown Soviet soldier on the battles from room to room.



A machine-gunner covers a storm group in the process of capturing a position. The DP-27 rifle, known as the record player, was a light weapon, well suited to the task.

Rattenkrieg – rat war – because the Soviets crawled through the sewers to attack from the rear. Wilhelm Hoffman had fought at the factories but was in despair at the warfare in the city.

“You can’t see them: they hide in buildings and basements and strike at us from all sides – even from the rear. Such barbarians, to use gangster tactics against us. Russian soldiers have suddenly reappeared in a sector which we occupied two days ago, and the battle has begun all over again. Our people are getting killed not just in the front line, but in rear sectors that we already have,” Hoffman scribbled in his diary.

The Soviets also felt bitter about the battles, as they fought for days over the same building in the city’s burning inferno.

“We have fought for 15 days for a single house, with mortars, machine guns, grenades and bayonets. The front is a corridor between burnt-out rooms,” an officer told Vasily Grossman.

“The street is no longer measured in metres, but in corpses. Stalingrad is no longer a town. By day it is an enormous cloud of burning, blinding smoke ... And when night arrives – one of those

scorching, howling, bleeding nights – the dogs plunge into the Volga and swim desperately for the other bank. The nights of Stalingrad are a terror for them. Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long; only men endure,” the officer recounted. The Soviets’ nerves were also frayed by the fighting, but the soldiers fought on steadfastly. The future of the motherland depended on their courage.

Pavlov’s men held out for months

Chuikov had decreed in his Order No. 179 that storm groups of a few men would take houses and hold them until joined by *“a consolidation group, [with] ammunition and food for six days”*, after which each *“building shall become a towering fortress”*. The idea was that a few soldiers would be able to withstand German counter-attacks. A prime example of this strategy was seen at Pavlov’s House.

On 27th September, a group of four soldiers, led by Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, sneaked into a four-storey building on Penzenskaya Street, 100 metres behind enemy lines. According to one of Pavlov’s men, *“it stuck out into the German defences”*. No Germans ►

An endless nightmare awaited the Germans at the Tractor Plant and in other industrial districts. Despite fierce fighting, the Soviets held on to the factories.





were in the building, however, when the Soviet squad searched the house under cover of darkness.

That night, the Germans realised there was activity inside the building, but it was too late. Reinforcements had already arrived at Pavlov's House, and just over 50 men stood ready to defend the property, which was already mined and surrounded by barbed wire. Machine guns and anti-tank rifles stuck out of the windows on the top floor, mowing down the Germans every time they began to attack.

"We ran the house on a shift system, while one group of between 30 to 40 men would be on duty, watching for a German attack, the other would be busy gathering wood or preparing food. When I was not artillery spotting, I kept watch with the rest of the soldiers. I occupied the same vantage point as Pavlov – we threw grenades together and ate from the same ration tin," reported one of the house's defenders, Georgi Potanski.

The building on Penzenskaya Street was soon nicknamed Pavlov's House, although the eponymous sergeant lost command when a higher-ranking officer arrived. His name was Lieutenant Ivan Afanasyev:

"I told Pavlov my name and why I was there. 'Excellent,' he said. 'We could use a bit of help.' ... Pavlov led me down a narrow corridor and into the basement. A kerosene lamp was burning. In the middle of the room stood a table, like a carpenter's bench. On it lay a box of shells and about a dozen grenades. In one corner there was an iron bedstead, on which there was an untidy pile of blankets and pillows."

Immediately, Afanasyev set about orchestrating a heroic defence that, week after week, beat the frustrated German troops back from the building.

"Our guns hammered away at the enemy. The Nazis reeled back, but almost immediately threw themselves into the attack once more. This happened time after time. ... Pavlov would hurl a grenade at anyone who dared come close to the house. ... We were nearly out of grenades and started throwing bricks instead," recalled Afanasyev.

Snipers lay in wait

By then, the Soviets had been defending Pavlov's House for an unimaginable two months. The remaining survivors prepared to fight to the last inside the building. *"We'll die before we let the Germans pass us,"* one of the Soviet soldiers scratched on a wall of the house.

But in late November, the Germans gave up trying to enter the battered building. The army needed ►►

Molotov cocktails were thrown at German tanks.



A windproof match, for example, could be used as a fuse.



Hitler considered Stalingrad won

During the Battle of Stalingrad, Adolf Hitler delivered a fateful speech in the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich, where 19 years earlier he'd launched an attempted coup. The Führer hailed the rapid advance to the east while explaining why the enemy was corrupt, a failure, run by Jews – and doomed to lose.

ENEMY: Hitler began by naming the Jews as the enemy ruling the countries Nazi Germany was fighting. Worst of all was the Soviet Union, his message went.

Our opponents are the same, and behind these opponents there stands the same eternally driving force, the international Jew. And it is again by no means an accident that these forces were on the inside, and have now met again on the outside. Internally, in the 'coalition', which we know only too well, they included all the enemies of the Reich, beginning with the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and the entire stock market speculator-group, all the way to the *Rote Fahne* [Red Banner, Socialist newspaper] in Berlin, and everything which lay in between.

Outside, we have again today the same coalition as before, from the chief of that international Masonic lodge, the half-Jew Roosevelt, and his Jewish brain trust, to the Jewry of purest water in Marxist-Bolshevik Russia. They are the same enemies as before, the same foes as then. In the World War we had them as external foes, in our struggle as internal foes, and now, as a National-Socialist State, as external foes again.

COMPARISON: Then Hitler measured Nazi Germany's strength against the Soviet Union and explained why Germany, alone, had created a successful socialist state. He used the comparison to portray the Soviets as an inferior enemy.

[I]f anyone in the rest of the world imagines he can shatter this people, he does not know the enduring heart of this people today, nor the enduring power, the knowledge which guides this people politically today – the National Socialist Party and its mighty organisation.

I am calm therefore when I face any German who is fighting in the East, or who comes home on leave and I can tell each one of them, just look at our organisation. Compare our home cities, compare the workers' settlements which we are building, compare our social organisation with what you have seen on the other side. Compare the fate and the lot of the German farmer with the lot of that Russian farmer. Compare all of that, my dear friend, and then give me your judgment as to who has managed things better, and above all else, who has had more honourable intentions?

TRANSFORMATION: In his speech, Hitler stressed that since WWI, thanks to the Nazis, Germany had built a strong national identity that no other nation would be able to defeat. Earlier, he cited the Jews as the direct cause of the Germans losing the war in 1918.



Hitler addresses top Nazis in the beer hall on the anniversary of his failed coup.

LIES: Official Soviet statements were denigrated as lies. Ironically, Hitler would claim that he had reached the Caucasus at breakneck speed.

STRATEGY: Adolf Hitler had a reputation for making rash decisions on the battlefield. In the speech, he discussed how he made them. For instance, in 1942, the Soviets expected the Germans to strike in the middle of the Eastern Front, near Moscow, as they had in 1941.

If you read the Russian communiqués since 22nd June, you will read the following every day: "Fighting of unimportant character" or maybe "of important character". "We have shot down three times as many German planes." ... They have so many of us missing that they amount to more divisions than we can ever muster. But above all, they are always fighting in the same place. Here and there they then say modestly, after 14 days, "We have evacuated a city." But in general, they have been fighting since 22nd June in the same place, always successfully; we are constantly being beaten back, and in this continued retreat we have slowly come to the Caucasus. I say "slowly"!

For the speed with which our soldiers have now traversed territory is gigantic. Also, what was traversed this year is vast and historically unique.

Now I do not always do things just as the others want them done. I consider what the others probably believe, and then do the opposite on principle. So, if Mr Stalin expected that we would attack in the centre, I did not want to attack in the centre, not only because Mr Stalin probably believed I would, but because I didn't care about it any more at all.

But I wanted to come to the Volga, to a definite place, to a definite city. It accidentally bears the name of Stalin himself, but do not think that I went after it on that account. Indeed, it could have an altogether different name.

CHANGE OF COURSE: The Führer explained the strategy behind setting course for Stalingrad and said the change of direction was not due to the fact that the city bore Stalin's name.

VICTORY: Luftwaffe bombing had rendered the Volga virtually useless as a transport route through the Soviet Union. Stalingrad was therefore as good as fallen, according to Hitler. But as he gave his speech, he knew the Soviets were holding out against an increasingly weakened enemy.

At any rate, the Russians are not at the Pyrenees or before Seville; that, you see, is the same distance as for us to be in Stalingrad today, or on the Terek, let us say. But we are there; that can really not be disputed. That is a fact, after all.

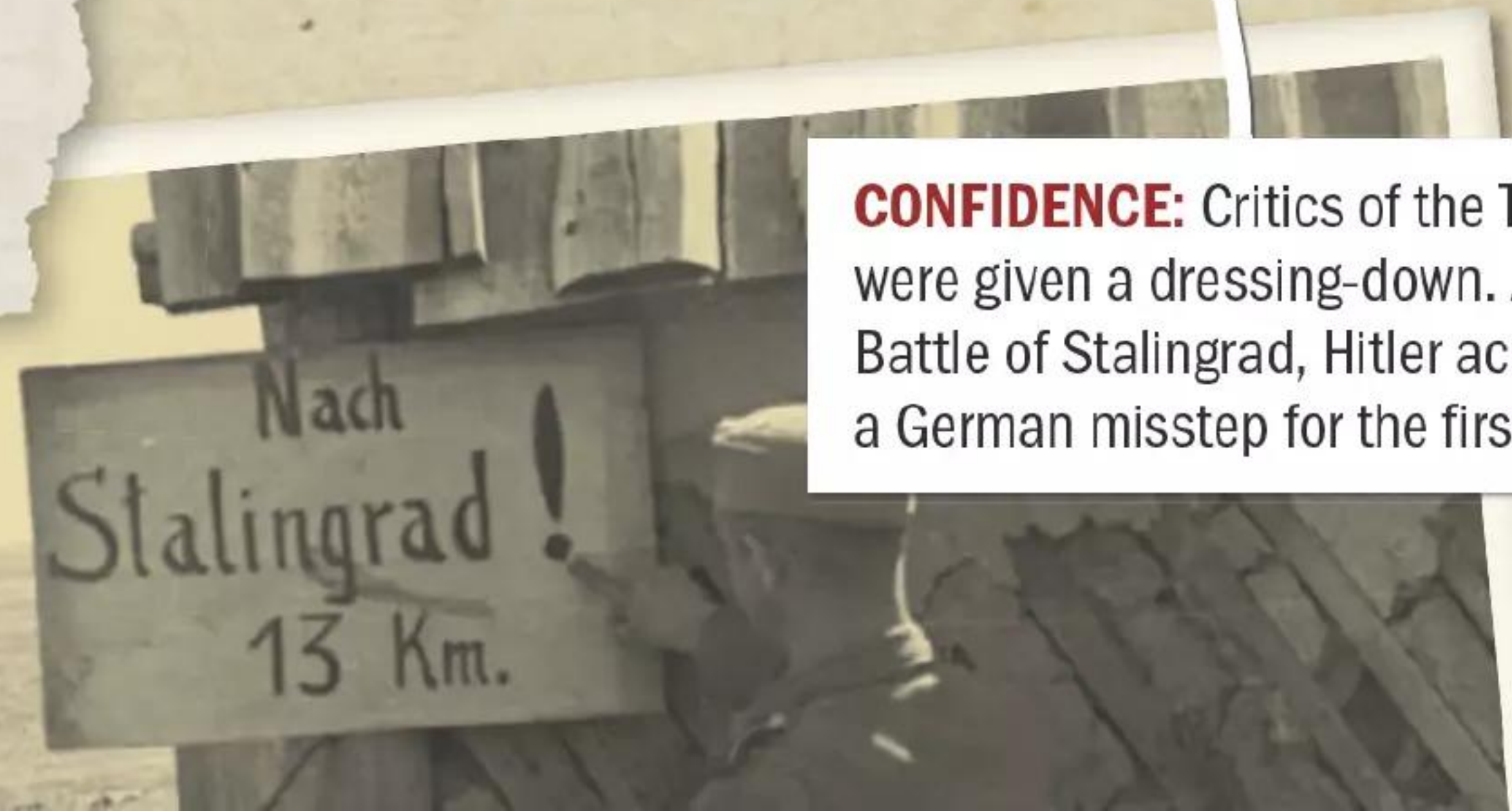
Naturally, when nothing else will do any more, they also say it's a mistake. Then they suddenly turn around and say: "It is absolutely a mistake for the Germans to have gone to Kirkenes, or to have gone to Narvik, or now perhaps to Stalingrad. What do they expect to do in Stalingrad? For Stalingrad is a capital mistake, a strategic mistake." We will just wait and see whether that was a strategic mistake.

[Stalingrad] is an important point, that is, there 30 million tonnes of traffic can be cut off, including about nine million of oil shipments. There all the wheat pours in from those enormous territories of the Ukraine, of the Kuban territory, then to be transported to the north. There the manganese ore was forwarded. A gigantic terminal was there; I wanted to take it. And do you know, we're modest: that is, we have it; there are only a couple of very small places left there.

Now the others say: why aren't you fighting there? Because I don't want to make a second Verdun [World War I battle in which 70,000 soldiers died every month], but would rather do it with very small shock units. Time plays no part here. No ships come up the Volga any more –that is the decisive thing.

VERDUN: Approximately 714,000 soldiers died during the Battle of Verdun. In the Battle of Stalingrad, up to two million died in five and a half months.

CONFIDENCE: Critics of the Third Reich were given a dressing-down. After the Battle of Stalingrad, Hitler acknowledged a German misstep for the first time.



The Soviets were short of men and ammo in the autumn, but their machine gun offered a slight advantage in terms of superior firing rate, at 900 rounds per minute.

soldiers elsewhere in Stalingrad, and the house no longer posed a threat. Moreover, the building had cost the Germans too dearly in human lives – according to General Chuikov, the Germans lost more soldiers trying to take Pavlov's House than during the capture of Paris. Although German soldiers were dropping like flies in the battle for Pavlov's House, the losses were nothing compared to how many soldiers were killed by a sniper's bullet. The Red Army had a large number of snipers, who worked as lone wolves or in small groups. The invisible killers found perfect hiding places on the top floors of Stalingrad's buildings, where they had a good view of enemy positions. Others hid in old barrels or pipes.

"Russian snipers hit anyone who is so careless as to show a glimpse of himself from behind his shelter," Wilhelm Hoffman wrote. Artilleryman Wigand Wüster also experienced the constant threat:

"Russian snipers ... were lurking everywhere, and many lone soldiers fell victim to them. ... It was wise to sprint from cover to cover."

Many Soviet sharpshooters went down in history as legends, filling the columns of Red Army newspapers week after week. The most famous was Vasily Zaitsev, who in October alone killed 149 Germans with his

reliable Mosin rifle. He also trained young recruits in the art of killing from a distance.

"A sniper has got to be daring, cold-blooded and persistent; he must master his weapon, be a competent tactician and have good eyesight. These are the qualities that determine whether someone can be a sniper. I taught them and went out with them on ambushes," Zaitsev said afterwards.

One soldier who had all these qualities was Anatoly Chekhov, who was just 19 years old when he made his debut among Stalingrad's rubble. At first, however, his trigger finger failed him: *"When I first got the*



Right then I popped out of the trench, shouldered my rifle, and shot. I got him. ■ Sniper Vasily Zaitsev on the hunt for a German sharpshooter.

rifle, I couldn't bring myself to kill a living being: one German was standing there for about four minutes, talking, and I let him go. When I killed my first one, he fell at once. Another one ran out and stooped over the killed one, and I knocked him down, too.

"When I first killed, I was shaking all over: the man was only walking to get some water! ... I felt scared: I'd killed a person! Then I remembered our people and started killing them without mercy," said Chekhov, who after a few days as a sniper evolved into a cold-blooded killer, known as a "hunter of two-legged animals".

"I've become a beast of a man: I kill, I hate them as if it is a normal thing in my life. I've killed 40 men, three in the chest, the others in the head. When you fire, the head instantly jerks back or to the side. He throws up his arms and collapses," Chekhov told reporter Vasily Grossman, who profiled Soviet snipers in his front-line accounts.

Chekhov brought the lives of 256 German soldiers to an abrupt end during the Battle of Stalingrad. With patience and ruthlessness, Soviet snipers were unrivalled among the ruins. But they weren't alone.

Hunters chased each other

Scattered across the apocalyptic landscape, German riflemen also lay in wait with their sniper rifles. Often,

though, the shooters ended up chasing each other for days. When an area was ravaged by long-range sniper bullets, both the Germans and the Soviets sent their best sniper after the enemy. No one was better at this than Zaitsev, who went on several missions against German snipers. One was in an area near Mamayev Kurgan, where the fighting surged back and forth.

"I set off. I encountered a skilled German sniper. I stuck a helmet out from a trench, and he shot it immediately. I had to work out where he was. This was very difficult to do because he'd shoot and kill you the moment you try to take a look. Which means you've got to trick him, outsmart him. ... I put my helmet on a parapet, he shoots, and the helmet goes flying. I hunted him for five hours," Zaitsev explained. He struggled to figure out where the German had dug himself in.

"I took off one of my mittens, put it on a board, and stuck it up out of the trench. The German thinks that someone is putting his hands up in surrender, that he doesn't want to fight. The German shoots. I take down the glove and see where it has been shot through. Based on the holes I work out where he's shooting from. ... I grabbed a trench periscope and started looking. I found him," Zaitsev recalled, though he couldn't get the enemy in his gunsight.

Instead, the Soviet had to wait for the German gunner to reveal himself. Finally, he got up to ►





The Sydney Morning Herald

22nd October 1942

Germans fail to exploit gains

Yet another pause, doubtless temporary, marks the long, drawn-out struggle for Stalingrad.

The Germans' latest offensive, now eight days old, has won them a threatening salient in the north-western industrial area, but for two days all the enemy's attempts to exploit his gains have failed.

Factors contributing to the Red Army's success are: one, the courage and tenacity of the garrison in withstanding one of the war's most concentrated bombardments; two, the deterioration of the weather; three,

the reinforcement of the garrison across the heavily shelled and bombed Volga River; four, the increasing strain on the Germans of months of fighting.

Yesterday the enemy made two attacks in Stalingrad, led by 30 to 40 tanks, supported by many infantry battalions. Both were directed against the Red October factory, and both were repulsed.

This factory, which sprawls over 60 acres, has become the battle's focal point. It is the southernmost of the fortress-factories guarding the northern approaches, and if it falls, as the others have done, the remaining river crossings will be endangered and the city's further defence will become complicated.

Berlin Radio claims that the factory is surrounded. This is an obvious exaggeration.

German troops lost momentum in September. The world press followed the important battle closely.



observe some Red Army troops. When he did, Zaitsev's punishment was swift.

"Right then I popped out of the trench, shouldered my rifle and shot. I got him."

Soldiers lived on cigarettes and vodka

The threat of snipers was just one of the many dangers lurking in Stalingrad. Death hung in the air, accompanied by an endless cacophony of machine-gun crackles and thunderous explosions. There was never silence. When the guns fell quiet, the wails of wounded comrades grated on the soldiers' nerves.

"It's not a human sound, just the dull cry of suffering of a wild animal," wrote German war

correspondent Clemens Podewils, who'd followed the 6th Army from its advance across the steppe and into the city. At the front, compatriots were dropping like flies. Soldiers never know whether the comrades they woke up with would still be alive at the end of the day. The constant reminder of death broke their spirit.

"Men and officers alike have become bitter and silent. ... We have lost many men; every time you move you have to jump over bodies. ... The soldiers are calling Stalingrad the mass grave of the Wehrmacht," wrote Wilhelm Hoffman.

Even the hard-boiled General Chuikov found it all too much at times.

"There's firing and thunder all around. You send off a liaison officer to find out what's happening, and he gets killed. That's when you shake all over with tension," Chuikov revealed in a rare candid moment. Normally he kept up an impenetrable façade, with little compassion for his troops, because the general knew full well that every soldier who crossed the Volga to Stalingrad faced a tough time.

"Approaching this place, soldiers used to say: 'We are entering hell.' And after spending one or two days here, they said: 'No, this isn't hell, this is ten times worse than hell,'" the general elaborated.

In both camps, soldiers therefore looked forward to breaks, when they could forget the horrors surrounding them. Meals were a highlight – especially when there was enough food in the bowls. But for both Fritz and Ivan, a cigarette was almost preferable to a slice of bread. The Soviets were given a small daily ration of Russian-grown tobacco, called *machorka*, which they liked to roll in newspaper. Many even claimed that the newspaper's ink was an important part of the taste. The smoking breaks, which both sides tried to drag out for as long as possible, help to ease frayed nerves and remind the soldiers of a carefree existence far from the hell of Stalingrad.

The Germans also used their breaks to relax with card games, which the Soviets didn't understand at all when they surprised unwary Germans, cards in hand. They counted themselves lucky that the Red Army didn't supply its troops with playing cards, but instead distributed vodka as part of the field rations. For a brief period, vodka was even parachuted into Soviet positions by Polikarpov dive-bombers.

"We used to slow down and shout: 'Ivan! Vodka's coming!'" one pilot recalled.

The Soviets' daily vodka consumption was measured in grams. When the bottle was passed around and cups were filled halfway with 100 grams of vodka, it was the highlight of the day. But the strain of combat was so great that soldiers could rarely get enough alcohol. Medical alcohol was also happily downed, and during the fighting in the factory area, industrial alcohol never stayed long on the shelves. Even antifreeze was poured through the activated

We were worn down, nearly out of ammunition. We had limited supplies. ■ General Chuikov about his troops' desperate situation.

carbon in gas masks and consumed, even though it could blind the soldiers.

Letters from home, however, were the greatest ray of hope for the majority of German and Soviet soldiers in Stalingrad. The feeling of receiving a battered envelope and being transported back home to loved ones surpassed even the most desperately wanted shot of vodka. Then the soldiers were reminded of what they were fighting the hopeless battles for.

"I can't stop worrying. I know that you are fighting constantly. I will always be your faithful wife. My life belongs to you and to our world," were a German wife's reassuring words to her husband, while a Soviet soldier called Kolya wrote a letter to his chosen one, Mariya, remembering the past: *"I think you will remember our last evening together. Because now, this minute, it is exactly a year since we were parted. And it was very difficult for me to say goodbye."*

The soldiers read the missives again and again, and often kept their most recent letter close to their heart.

"I am very happy that you are fighting so well and have been awarded a medal. Fight to the last drop of your blood," a Soviet spouse urged her husband, Lieutenant Charnosov, in a letter found on his body. Soldiers found many unanswered letters in pockets when they searched the uniforms of their dead

compatriots for identification papers. A fallen Soviet soldier carried a message from his young son:

"I miss you very much. Please come and visit, I so want to see you, if only for one hour. My tears pour as I write this. Daddy, please come and see us."

Winter came to the Volga

During October, the temperature dropped drastically in Stalingrad, and freezing winds burned soldiers' faces red. By the end of the month, frost set in, erasing the memory of summer's blazing heat on the barren plains outside the city. From the northern reaches, huge blocks of ice the size of ships broke free and began to flow down the Volga.

"The ice floes collide, crumble and grind against each other, and the swishing sound, like that of shifting sands, can be heard quite a distance from the bank," noted Vasily Grossman.

General Chuikov and his commanders knew that the change in the weather could be a decisive advantage for the Soviets. But first Stalingrad had to undergo a week-long transition from the cold autumn to the harsh winter, which left the city cut off and vulnerable.

"In early November the absolute worst thing was the Volga. It was starting to ice up, but the river►

General Chuikov was often in mortal danger because he placed his headquarters close to the front. At one point, the Germans were only 800 metres away.



was still flowing. There was no regular river transport. The armoured cutters couldn't get through. In other words, we weren't getting supplies. The planes could only drop supplies at night because they couldn't come out during the day. ... Sometimes what they dropped would hit the bank, sometimes it would go to the enemy, sometimes to us. ... We were worn down, nearly out of ammunition. We had limited supplies, limited amounts of food," explained Chuikov.

Hitler still believed in victory

Hitler had followed the Germans' progress in October from a distance. General Friedrich Paulus's troops in the 6th Army held 90 percent of Stalingrad, and the Führer still expected the city to be captured before November. The Wehrmacht had now pushed all the way to the Volga, splitting Chuikov's 62nd Army into two isolated pockets, drained of resources, trying to hold out.

When Hitler gave a radio address in Munich on 8th November, he made sure to declare, in his usual bombastic style, that everything was going to plan. He explained that Stalingrad had not yet been completely captured for the simple reason that the Führer did not want to see casualties like those sustained during the savage World War I battle for the city of Verdun.

In fact, everyone knew that time was against Hitler's troops on the Stalingrad front. No one had forgotten how the Soviet winter of the previous year had exposed the German Army's weakness. Moreover, many German soldiers in the 6th Army had not had any leave since Operation Blue began on 28th June, and were now listening to the Führer's Munich speech, completely exhausted, with their fighting spirit in free fall. For them, the final fall of Stalingrad was far from just a formality.

In a message to General Paulus and his officers just a few days later, Hitler was a little more realistic, saying that he was aware of the difficulties in the battle for Stalingrad and of the soldiers' declining morale. However, the Führer believed that the Soviets' problems were even greater, and he expected

that one final offensive would be enough for the Germans to secure the city.

Shortly before dawn on 11th November 1942, the Germans attacked again. This time, Hitler did everything in his power to crush the last resistance in Stalingrad and leave the rest of the warzone open.

"Hitler was obsessed with the symbolism of Stalingrad. To clean up the last few points of resistance in November, he ordered that even tank drivers should be assembled as infantry for a last push," reported Paulus's intelligence officer in Stalingrad, Winrich Behr.

But despite their desperate situation, the Soviets' willingness to sacrifice themselves remained unchanged. Each soldier continued to fight to the last drop of blood, stubbornly defending the last remnants of the industrial city that were still in the hands of the motherland. Once again, the Germans ran into a Soviet wall and the advance became the Germans' last in Stalingrad. The offensive was not only futile, but catastrophically worsened the situation for the soldiers of the 6th Army.

Hitler's decision to use tank crews as infantry turned out to be a strategic blunder of the highest order. Without armoured reserves, the rear of the 6th Army was exposed, with no possible means of counter-attack in case of a surprise assault. The German flanks were thus even weaker than they had been before.

Paulus now felt so pressured by the situation and Hitler's unrealistically high expectations that the general's doctor warned the 52-year-old army commander that he was heading for a breakdown.

It did not help Paulus's condition that the ice on the Volga became thick enough in several places for light sledges to haul supplies, food and ammunition across the river for Chuikov's troops. Although the Germans still held the vast majority of the city, Chuikov felt optimistic for his troops in Stalingrad. With the Volga frozen solid, supply lines could reopen, and the general also sensed that his superiors, Zhukov and Vasilevsky, were plotting something big:

"We had sensed that our high command was preparing a major attack, but we didn't know where exactly. ... We'd been used to talking to people from front HQ every day, but now they'd all vanished," Chuikov revealed.

The leaders' plan was so top-secret that the Soviet commander of the Stalingrad front did not learn of it until a sustained thunder of artillery roared in the distance, early in the morning of 19th November. German soldiers of the 6th Army also heard the massive roar and were beside themselves with joy, assuming the sound was coming from their own auxiliaries. For a brief moment, they thought there was a chance that the fighting in the ruined city would be over before winter took hold. But they were sorely disappointed. The worst days of Stalingrad still lay ahead. ■

MEANWHILE

ENGLAND:

- Conscription is lowered to 18 years.

NORTHERN GERMANY:

- First V2 rocket launched.

SOLOMON ISLANDS:

- Guadalcanal naval battle begins.



The city battles wore the
German troops down to
*lifeless shadows with
thousand-yard stares
painted on their faces.*





Wretched German troops *surrender to the Soviets at Stalingrad in 1943. Of the approximately 95,000 prisoners of war, fewer than one in 19 returned home alive.*

Stalingrad, winter 1943

When I got to the
place where my
house had stood,
I saw only ruins.

Stalingrad resident Nikolai Razuvayev on the cost of the battle.

DOOMSDAY AWAITED IN STALINGRAD

Doomsday awaited in Stalingrad

In early 1943, a brutal nightmare awaited the German soldiers fighting a lost battle against hunger, cold and empty cartridge boxes. Their commander was left helpless when, on 10th January, the Soviets launched a final major attack to liberate Stalingrad and crush the remnants of the German 6th Army.

By Troels Ussing

Everyone on both sides of the front knew that the Germans' days in Stalingrad were numbered. When the Red Army, with 218,000 men and General Konstantin Rokossovsky at the front, launched Operation Ring on the morning of 10th January 1943, there was no doubt what the outcome would be. The offensive would crush the last of the German 6th Army's steppe defences west of Stalingrad, end the torment of the encircled soldiers and liberate the city.

The opposing general, Friedrich Paulus, was in a hopeless situation. Yet he had not dignified the Soviets with a response to their terms of surrender. The Soviets considered the silence an insult. They had made a fair offer – if they honoured their promises. The Germans' silence could only be answered with deadly fire. With 5,610 field guns and mortars, the Red Army paralysed the enemy before troops rushed forward, covered by 169 tanks and 300 aircraft.

"The enemy suffered enormous casualties from our fire. Our infantry swiftly advanced through the enemy's front lines and continued to push on. At every step, there were blackened German bodies [and] wrecked enemy guns. ... The country, white the day before, was now grey with soot and smoke, and dotted with thousands of black shell holes. In

spite of these enormous losses, the enemy continued to resist. ... This fighting continued till 13th January, when our troops captured the whole western part of the pocket," wrote a Soviet colonel of the fighting in the initial phase of the operation.

The pocket was attacked from all sides and, advancing rapidly on the icy ground, the Red Army encountered large piles of frozen corpses, battered by the barrage of Soviet shells.

"The dead are lying, grotesquely twisted, their mouths and eyes still wide open with horror, frozen stiff, with their skulls torn open and their bowels hurled out, most of them with bandages on their hands and feet," noted German Communist Erich Weinert, who'd fled Hitler's Nazi rule in the 1930s and followed the Soviet troops as a propagandist.

War correspondent Vasily Grossman was also behind the front line. The reporter noted how winter's sub-zero temperatures were as big a killer of Germans as the Soviet T-34 tanks.

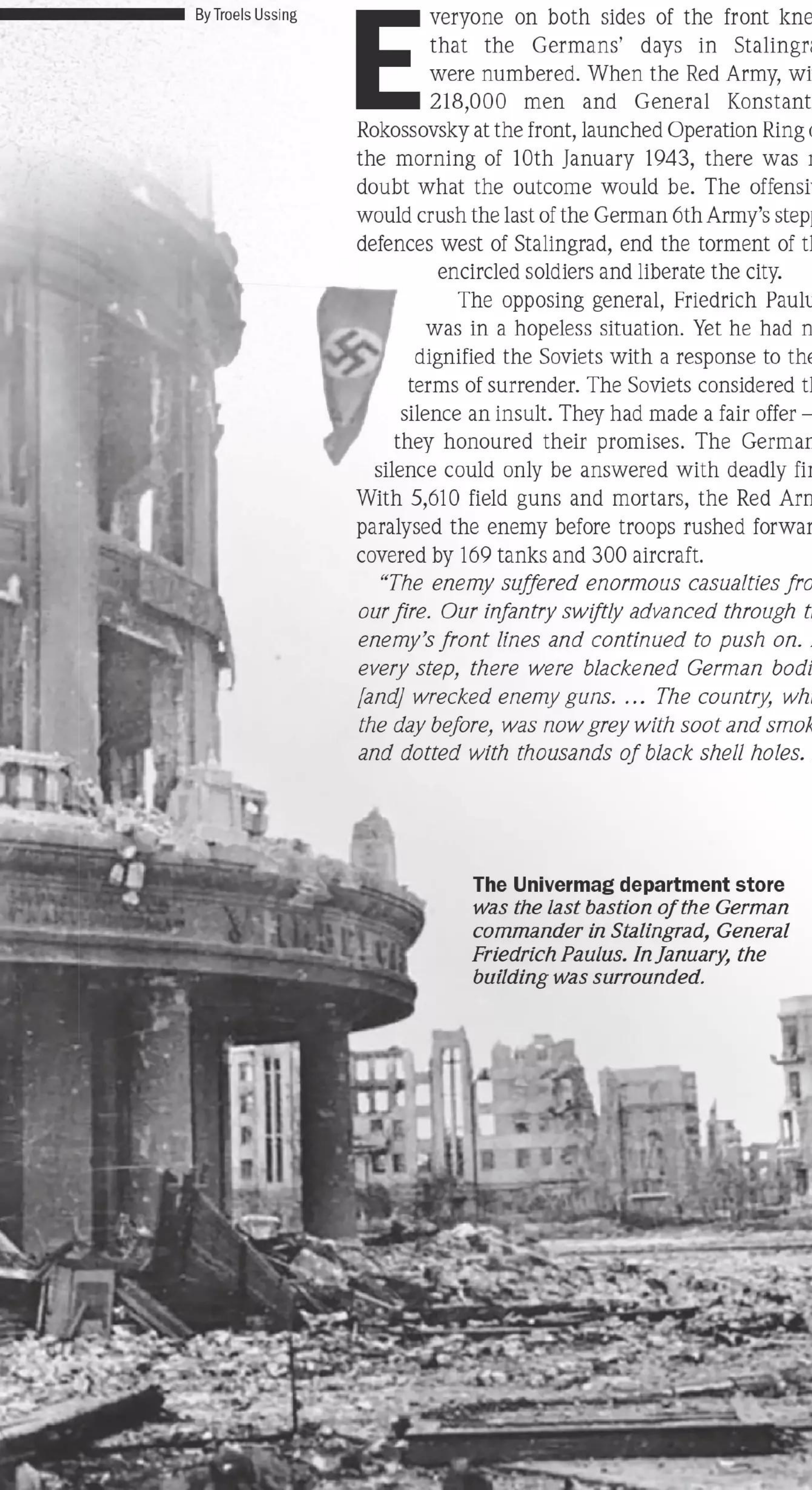
"Snow and the freezing air ice up your nostrils. Your teeth ache. There are frozen Germans, their bodies undamaged, along the road we follow. It wasn't us who killed them. The cold did. They have bad boots and bad coats. Their tunics are thin and look like paper ... There are footprints all over the snow. They tell us how the Germans withdrew from the villages along the roads, and from the roads into the ravines, throwing their arms away," Grossman wrote. Temperatures often dipped below minus 30 degrees during the winter months.

With death on their heels, the soldiers of the 6th Army trudged towards the city, hoping that salvation lay there. In the midst of this misery, 30-year-old officer Joachim Wieder noticed how the situation in Stalingrad had changed drastically in six months.

"Drifting along through the snowstorm, this was the wreck of the 6th Army that had advanced to the Volga during the summer, so confident of victory. Men from all over Germany, doomed to destruction in a far-off land, mutely enduring their suffering, tottered in pitiful droves through the murderous eastern winter. These were the same soldiers who had formerly marched through large parts of Europe as proud conquerors. Now the enemy was at their backs and death lurked everywhere."

The soldiers hoped they'd find salvation further east. But there was no redemption in the Stalingrad

The Univermag department store was the last bastion of the German commander in Stalingrad, General Friedrich Paulus. In January, the building was surrounded.



pocket. Quite the opposite. Around the city, soldiers were forced to spend three more weeks in hell.

Airfield plagued by chaos

Many of the soldiers fled to the westernmost of the two remaining airfields in the pocket that remained in German hands. Pitomnik airfield had been the destination of wounded soldiers for two months, because the Germans had a large field hospital there. Here the troops were treated or sent home to their fatherland on a Heinkel or Junkers plane – if they were lucky. But there was no way the aircraft could carry all the thousands of wounded, who lay in long rows in icy tents, often freezing to death.

“Here was the greatest misery that I have seen in my whole life. An endless wailing of wounded and dying men ... most of them had received nothing to eat for days. No more food was given out to the wounded. Supplies were reserved for fighting troops,” read the words of an artilleryman named Alois Dorner, while officer Edgar Klaus reported that *“the airfield was in chaos: heaps of corpses, which men had carried out of the bunkers and tents which house the wounded and dumped”*.

Every day, 417 men on average were flown out, but in the final days, as the Soviets approached with their anti-aircraft guns, even fewer got away. The wounded stood in long queues, waiting in the cold, but the lucky few who could struggle aboard were not safe until the plane had landed on German territory.

“The planes could not gain height quickly enough and ran into heavy flak, thus coming to a terrible end. I saw from my trench on several occasions this apocalyptic fate and was very, very depressed,” recalled infantryman Siegfried Mühler. His compatriot, Corporal Joachim Grunow, saw how the Soviet fighters watched over Pitomnik like merciless, ferocious birds of prey: *“Every half hour, Russian aircraft attacked the airfield. Many comrades who were just about to be saved, having been loaded into aircraft, and were waiting to take off lost their lives at the very last moment.”*

On the morning of 15th January, the German troops at Pitomnik could hear Rokossovsky’s army approaching. The wounded, who were able to escape towards the smaller airfield of Gumrak in the east, trudged across the snowy steppes. The lucky ones were transported by truck or ambulance, but the few remaining opportunities to leave Stalingrad alive were disappearing by the day.

Last plane left the pocket

The Red Army captured over half of the pocket on 16th January, just six days into the Soviets’ final counteroffensive. At least 25,000 German defenders had fallen. The advancing Soviets encountered so many corpses on their way that they had difficulty

finding places to sleep. Infantryman Mikhail Alexeyev discovered that the captured trenches and bunkers were full of death.

“I was looking for a place to hide until morning, to get some sleep. There were many German positions safe, but nothing was available. I couldn’t use them, because the bodies of German soldiers took up all the ground... There were also so many maggots because of the dead bodies. And oh, the lice, the lice! I saw a dugout in the snow. I had warm clothing, so I went in there and bumped against something very stiff. It was dark, so I couldn’t see what it was. I thought they were sacks or something. So I made myself comfortable lying on these sacks. In the light of morning, I saw that I was sleeping on the bodies of killed German soldiers,” he wrote.

Meanwhile, thousands of Germans fled to Gumrak, 15 kilometres outside Stalingrad, to avoid suffering the same fate as their compatriots in the trenches. But on the way and at the airport, death was inescapable.

“It was a form of hell. The corpses lay in heaps beside the road, where men had fallen and died. Nobody cared. There were no bandages. The airfield was under bombardment, and 40 men were ▶

War materiel still emerges from the ground in Stalingrad, now Volgograd.

Spades from the Red Army were found in 2015. They were often used as weapons.

FRIEDRICH WILHELM PAULUS (1890-1957)

Although Paulus was not a skilled military leader, he rose to the top of the army. Hitler appreciated Paulus’s orderliness and made him commander of the 6th Army in January 1942. After defeat at Stalingrad, he spent the next ten years in captivity in Moscow, where he publicly supported Communism. The field marshal was a broken man and, while testifying at Nuremberg, was dubbed the Ghost of Stalingrad by the media. In 1953, Paulus was released and spent four years in East Germany before his death.





Soviets embraced and kissed as surrounding forces made contact with the 62nd Army, which had been defending Stalingrad for five months.

packed into a bunker dug for ten, which shook with every explosion,” reported one of the wounded.

The chaplain at the airfield’s small hospital was known as the “Death King of Gumrak” because he said farewell to hundreds of soldiers every day. The airport was the last route out of the pocket, but for the majority of wounded soldiers, Gumrak was a dead end. The threat from Soviet aircraft was so great that few German transport planes could land and take off, leaving soldiers with little chance of getting out alive.

On 22nd January, the last Heinkel transport aircraft touched down on the runway at Gumrak. Supplies were quickly unloaded before 19 wounded soldiers hobbled aboard. They were the last to leave the area via Gumrak. The plane also held the final sack of letters from the formerly enthusiastic troops. One of them was from a trapped soldier who had lost all hope of a happy ending for the 6th Army:

“I was horrified when I saw the map. We’re quite alone, without any help from outside. Hitler has left us in the lurch. ... [W]e are not going to be captured. When Stalingrad falls you will hear and read about it. Then you will know that I shall not return,” he wrote.

Paulus begged Hitler to surrender

On the same day that Rokossovsky’s tanks and soldiers captured Gumrak, Paulus realised that he had to make a clear statement to Hitler. The general had been headquartered at the fallen airfield and had seen the severity of the crisis first-hand. He allowed his despair to be heard in his tone with the Führer:

“Rations exhausted. What orders should I give to troops who have no more ammunition and are subjected to mass attacks supported by heavy artillery fire?” Paulus reported that

“disintegration is already starting in some places”. Two days later, the Soviets approached the western suburbs of Stalingrad, while General Chuikov was still pressing in from the east. Now Hitler’s loyal army commander asked directly for the Führer’s permission to make the right decision:

“As a result of strong incursions, the front has been torn open. Firing points and shelter are available only inside the city. Collapse is inevitable. The army requests permission to surrender so as to save the lives of those that remain.”

Adolf Hitler’s advisers, Kurt Zeitzler and Erich von Manstein, tried to convince him that the battle was lost. But giving up in Stalin’s city was a humiliation the Führer could not accept.

“Forbid surrender. The army will hold its position to the last soldier and last cartridge, and its heroic contribution to the building of defensive front and the salvation of Western civilisation,” was his reply.

Just two days later, forces from Rokossovsky’s army wedged their way between the 6th Army’s defenders. Here they joined up with Vasily Chuikov’s troops from the 62nd Army, who had been defending the city alone since September. The meeting caused the Soviet soldiers to embrace and kiss each other on the shelled hill of Mamayev Kurgan.

Advance cut German resistance in two

The Germans’ pocket at Stalingrad was split in two by the Soviet advance. In the northern part, General Kurt Strecker was trapped with his remaining forces in the industrial area. Paulus was in the southern part with the rest of the 6th Army.

Following the loss of Gumrak, the army chief had moved with his staff into a large basement complex under the Univermag department store on Red Square in the city centre, south of Mamayev Kurgan. The remains of Colonel Friedrich Roske’s 194th Grenadier Regiment defended the war-torn building, where a tattered swastika flag fluttered from a balcony. In the labyrinth of underground rooms, 250 German soldiers sheltered from the Soviet shelling.

Paulus spent most of his time lying listlessly in bed, afflicted by nervous tics. Physically, he was severely weakened by dysentery, while psychologically, the endless winter of warfare had broken down any capacity for leadership in his emaciated body. A week earlier, he had put his wedding ring in an envelope with a final letter to his wife. Mentally, the commander had given up, and Hitler’s refusal to allow surrender did nothing to ease Paulus’s condition.

The fact that on 30th January the Führer had promoted Paulus to the most senior military rank, field marshal, did not help. The commander and his staff knew very well that Hitler had an ulterior motive. No German field marshal had ever surrendered, and by awarding Paulus the rank, the

FACTS

While airlifts were operational, the Germans carried up to

35,000

wounded out of the pocket. Many soldiers clung to the planes as they took off, until they ran out of strength and fell.

Führer prevented the 6th Army commander from capitulating. It was clear that Hitler expected Paulus to commit suicide rather than become the highest-ranking German officer ever captured.

The Soviets knew nothing of Paulus's promotion. The Red Army moved forward with little resistance, and that day, the Soviet 64th Army, having slowly crushed the pocket from the south, stood only two kilometres south of Red Square. The troops under General Mikhail Shumilov had gathered momentum and were looking forward to victory.

"Our men were in high spirits. On 30th January, we took the train station. ... But there was still no

word on Paulus. We heard he'd flown out. Then, when we started getting large groups of prisoners, the officers told us that Paulus was in some basement with his staff. This had its effect on our men and officers. It would be something to capture him," said 64th Army political officer Alexander Yegorov.

After further investigation, the Soviets discovered that Paulus was hiding beneath Univermag. In the early hours of 31st January, soldiers of the 64th Army surrounded the department store and Colonel Roske's exhausted and frostbitten defence forces ceased their resistance. It was 07.35 when German headquarters sent a signal to a nearby German command centre: ►

German doctors coldly divided wounded

Wounded Germans received no or very little treatment in the field hospitals of the pocket. Only a small group received genuine help from the doctors, who had to make difficult choices between life and death 24 hours a day.

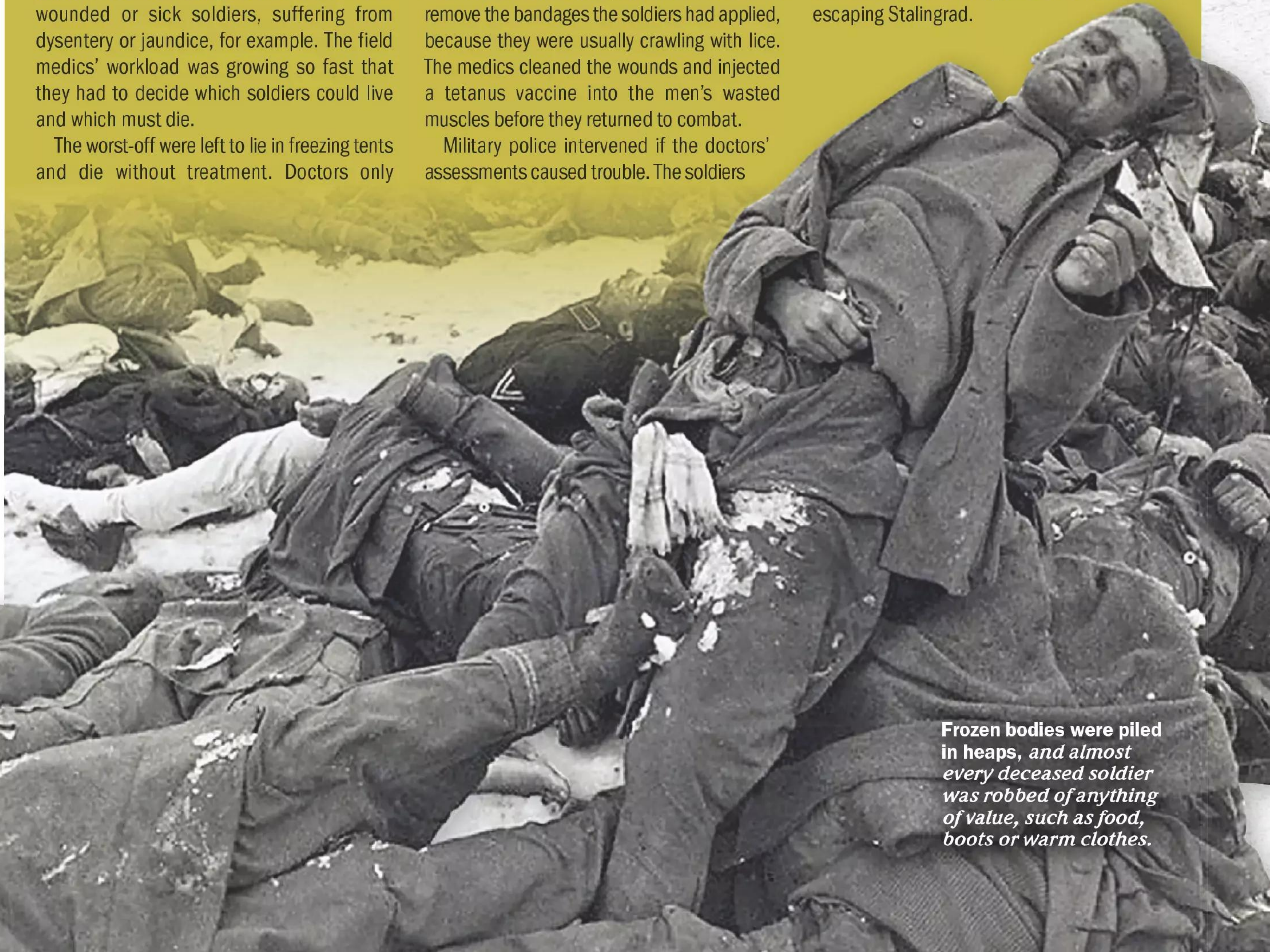
As winter gripped Stalingrad, chaos reigned in the German field hospitals at Pitomnik and Gumrak airports, now the 6th Army's last way out of the pocket. Every day, ambulances and sledges arrived with more wounded or sick soldiers, suffering from dysentery or jaundice, for example. The field medics' workload was growing so fast that they had to decide which soldiers could live and which must die.

The worst-off were left to lie in freezing tents and die without treatment. Doctors only

admitted those who had a chance of being patched up and regaining the ability to fight. Minor injuries, such as flesh wounds and frostbite, usually just earned a return ticket to the front. Before that, doctors hurried to remove the bandages the soldiers had applied, because they were usually crawling with lice. The medics cleaned the wounds and injected a tetanus vaccine into the men's wasted muscles before they returned to combat.

Military police intervened if the doctors' assessments caused trouble. The soldiers

called the police *Kettenhunde* – chain dogs – because they also carried out executions when doctors spotted men with a bullet wound in their right hand. The injury was the most common way of harming oneself in the hope of escaping Stalingrad.



Frozen bodies were piled in heaps, and almost every deceased soldier was robbed of anything of value, such as food, boots or warm clothes.

1943

After the 6th Army is surrounded at Stalingrad, the Red Army launches more attacks. It will not be until the winter of 1943 that the German Army can offer real resistance.

13/1

As part of Operation Little Saturn, the Soviets try to cut off the Germans in the Caucasus by driving a wedge westwards. The operation is a partial success, but the German troops escape.

Paulus surrendered with 24 generals. Some, including Paulus, were then recruited into the Soviet propaganda machine.



Friedrich Wilhelm Paulus



"The Russians are at the door of our bunker." With those words, the victor was finally proclaimed after five months of hell in Stalingrad.

Paulus surrendered in basement

Hitler was convinced that his promotion had ensured that Paulus would not surrender and be taken prisoner. But the newly appointed field marshal had other ideas. Paulus was a Christian and notoriously opposed to suicide. The otherwise blindly loyal general was done fighting both the enemy and Hitler.

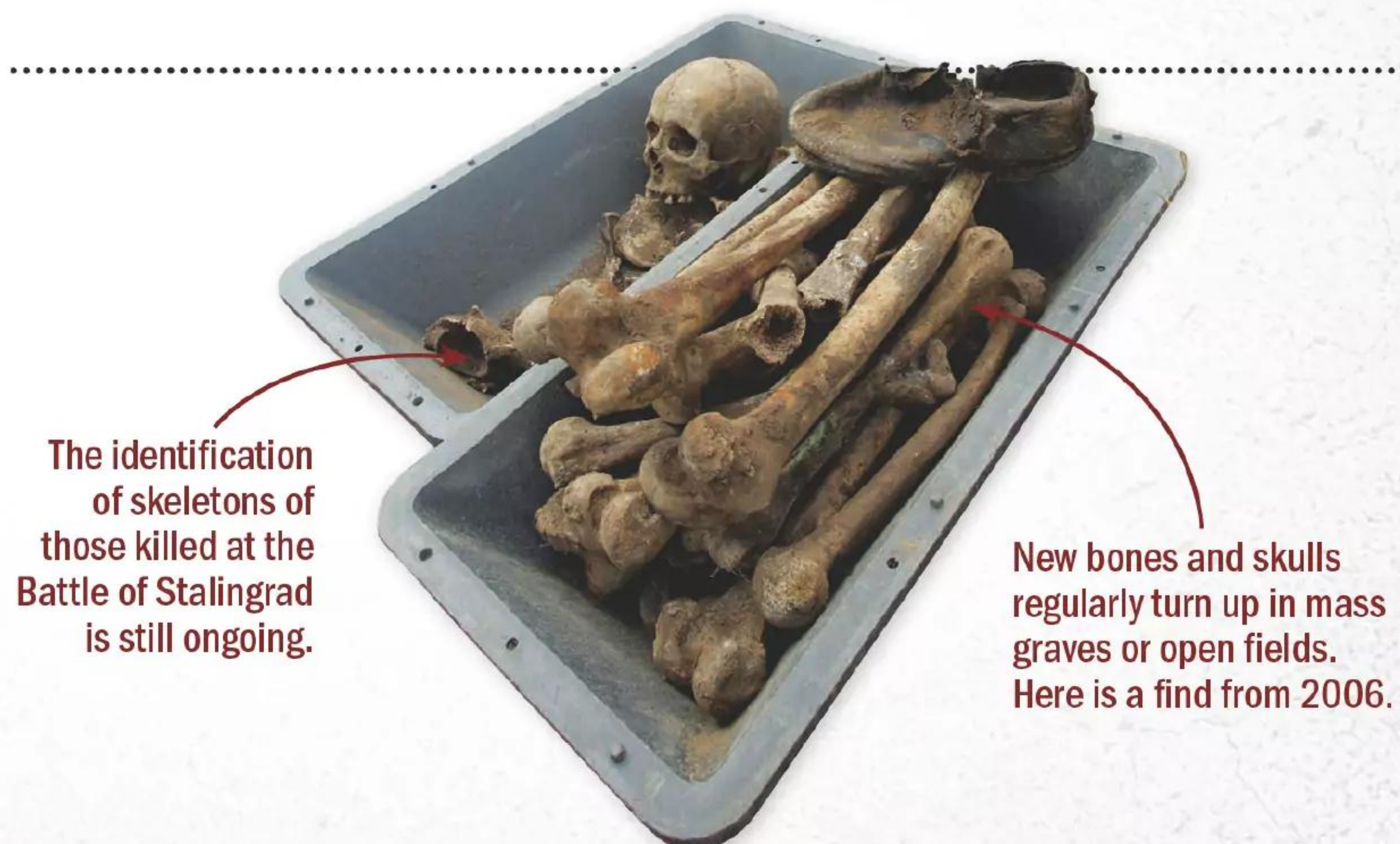
"I have no intention of shooting myself for this Bohemian corporal," Paulus said with rare sarcasm in his voice. His comment referred to the fact that Hitler was neither German – although he was not Bohemian either – nor did he have any military background other than the lowest rank of command.

Two Soviet lieutenants, Leonid Vinokur and Fyodor Ilchenko, were the first to enter Univermag's labyrinth of basement rooms. According to the Soviets, the *"stench was unbelievable"* down there, and *"you couldn't get through the front or back doors, the filth came up to your chest, along with human waste"*.

Chief of Staff Arthur Schmidt and Friedrich Roske, whom Hitler had appointed general the day before, received the Soviets. They explained that the German troops hadn't been able to dispose of the waste because of the constant bombardment. Instead, the staff had lived with the stench for days.

Barely an hour after the lieutenants had made contact with the German army command, Soviet General Ivan Laskin arrived. His rank was sufficiently high for the Germans to surrender to him. Paulus felt so wretched that Chief of Staff Schmidt had to discuss the terms of surrender. A German colonel went back and forth between the negotiating table and the field marshal in the office opposite, to keep him informed. After messages had passed to and fro for some time, however, Laskin insisted that the Soviet delegation meet with Paulus so they could formally arrest him.

"Paulus's room was dark. The filth was unbelievable. Paulus stood up when I went in. He ►



The identification of skeletons of those killed at the Battle of Stalingrad is still ongoing.

New bones and skulls regularly turn up in mass graves or open fields. Here is a find from 2006.

When you have a revolver it's quite easy. How cowardly you must be to flinch before such a deed! ■ Adolf Hitler condemns General Paulus for surrendering and not committing suicide.



hadn't shaved in a few weeks and he looked defeated. ... He'd been lying there in his coat and cap," recalled Lieutenant Vinokur.

"General Laskin gave his name and rank, declared Paulus a prisoner, and told him to surrender his personal weapons. Field Marshal Paulus then gave his own name and rank and stated that he was surrendering to Soviet forces ... And then, when General Laskin asked Paulus whether he was ill, he replied that he was well but had been affected by the poor diet and the long, drawn-out agonising experience of the ignominious capitulation of his army. And then he took out of his trouser pocket some small cubes of baked bread, like we used to make with oil. He showed them to us and said: '150 grams a day – that's all I've had to eat for many days now. I've been sharing my starvation rations with my soldiers, who only get 50 grams a day,'" recalled General Mutin from the Soviet delegation, who was also at the meeting.

Later in the day, the emaciated Paulus was escorted to a car that took him and Schmidt to 64th Army headquarters. There the army commander, General Shumilov, received him. The Soviet, a bulky man, was not impressed by the bony German commander's appearance, describing the person who was led into his office as tall, grizzled and exhausted. Paulus began to make Hitler salutes and proclaim "*Heil Hitler*" but changed his mind and said, "*Guten Tag*."

Paulus was wearing his general's uniform, because he hadn't yet received the appropriate one for a field marshal. Arthur Schmidt, following his commander, therefore informed Shumilov of the recent promotion: "*We have received Hitler's order by radio saying that Paulus has been awarded the rank of field marshal.*"

"May I report this to my supreme command?" General Shumilov asked.

Both Schmidt and Paulus said yes.

The capture of a field marshal, not just a general, only added to the Soviet triumph. Vodka arrived at the table, while the German officers were served a much-needed meal. Soviet staffer Konstantin Abramov also poured some vodka into Field Marshal Paulus's glass.

"At first Paulus refused to drink. Then I pushed him to take a glass. He said: 'I can't, I haven't eaten.' Then he said: 'We're ►

Hitler was shocked when Paulus surrendered. The formerly faithful general turned against the Führer, who regarded a hero's death for the Reich to be a natural sacrifice.

Only 5,000 Germans survived Soviet captivity



Straight after their surrender in early February 1943, a new nightmare began for the troops of the German 6th Army. The Luftwaffe had destroyed the railway network, so the Soviets decided that only prisoners who could get to the prison camps by their own means would escape being killed. Many wounded were therefore shot on the spot, while a few remained in Stalingrad, where they were forced to rebuild the city they had destroyed.

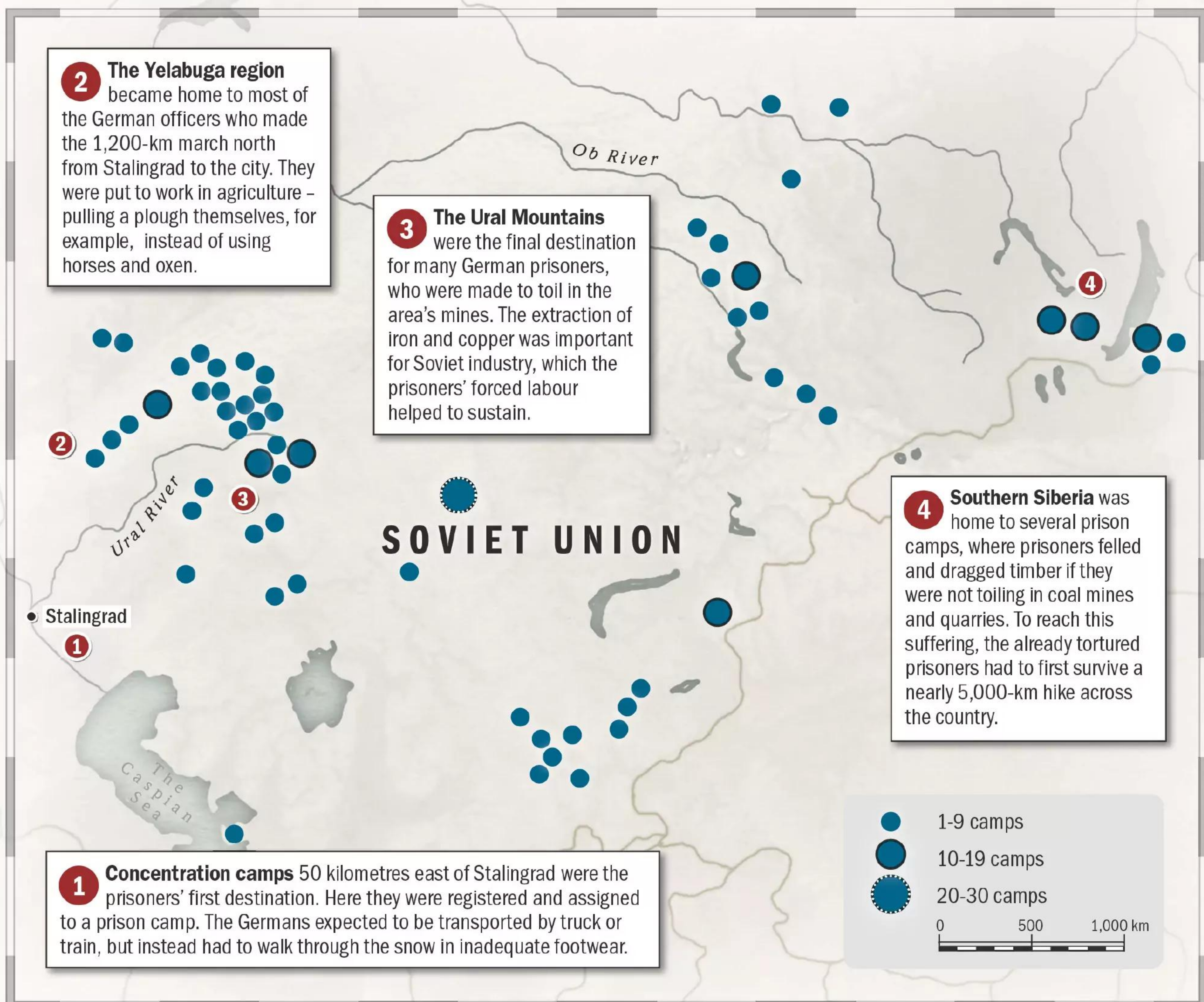
Exactly how many prisoners the Soviets took varies according to sources, but the Red Army put the figure at 95,000. This included only

those who reached the camps outside Stalingrad. Many died on the long marches to the camps, up to 5,000 km away in Siberia. There, a life of brutal attacks, hunger, disease and cold awaited. The prisoners had to work at least ten hours a day and received 500 grams of bread and some potato or cauliflower soup.

The hardships in the camps were so bad that only 5,000 of the 95,000 POWs returned to Germany alive when the Soviets began releasing prisoners in 1953. The men bore both physical and psychological scars from Stalingrad and 12 years of hard labour.



Captured Germans are led past the silo over which they'd fought a bitter battle.



FACTS

The victims of Stalingrad didn't die entirely in vain. The 6th Army held out just long enough for the **German troops in the Caucasus to withdraw.** The total loss would have been higher if Paulus had surrendered earlier.

not accustomed to drinking vodka.' Then he drank a glass, then a second. ... We'd been talking for a while already, just sitting there. I asked him why he didn't get out of the encirclement when he was free to leave. He said: 'That's for history to decide,'" Abramov recalled.

Paulus's hopeless struggle had so far condemned some 250,000 Germans to death in the Stalingrad pocket. But the news of his surrender didn't reach all the remaining Germans, who were hiding in bunkers and cellars in the city's ruins. As a result, the fighting didn't stop immediately and many soldiers of the 6th Army fought on defiantly, losing their lives even though their commander had already given up.

Red Army captured hordes of Germans

In the southern pocket, where Paulus had been, the fighting subsided in less than a day as word of the official surrender quickly spread.

"Those last days in Stalingrad were horrible: thousands of dead bodies, and the wounded men dying in the streets because the hospitals were overcrowded ... The surrender wasn't organised. Our bunker was 50 metres from our divisional HQ, but even though we were so close to them, we only learned about the surrender after the Russians had already showed up," German soldier Helmut Pist recollected afterwards. Moreover, the last battles cost unnecessary blood, because it took lot of persuasion to get the Germans to surrender.

The Soviets had to repeatedly attack German entrenchments before the soldiers surrendered.

"We'd shoot five or six times with the big guns and then send an envoy. If they didn't surrender, we'd shoot another five or six times, send the envoy. If that didn't do it, we shot at them again. Then they'd start to line up and beg to be taken prisoner," explained Lieutenant Leonid Vinokur of the Red Army.

In the isolated northern pocket, the defence continued within the heavily fortified industrial districts. The forces in the north, led by General Kurt Strecker, had no idea about the surrender and continued to fight. Resistance only stopped when Soviet planes began to scatter photographs of Paulus's capitulation over the area. On the morning of 2nd February 1943, Strecker surrendered.

"No more sign of fighting in Stalingrad," a German reconnaissance plane reported a few hours later.

In Germany, three days of national mourning were declared after the loss of Stalingrad and the 6th Army became public knowledge. The population mourned its dead and the thousands of captured soldiers, who would soon take the long road out of the ruins of Stalingrad to prison camps in the east.

On their way, a group of Germans from the 297th Infantry Division was confronted by a Soviet officer who pointed at the destroyed buildings in the city and shouted vengefully, *"That's how Berlin is going to look!"* The comment

Soviets dismantle the machine guns of an abandoned Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter. Over 700 Luftwaffe aircraft were lost in the battle.



**I could hear their skulls crack beneath my wheel. Bones too.
And I was glad. ■ A female driver speaking about the fallen Germans left behind.**

was to prove almost prophetic, for in the ruins of Stalingrad, the Red Army had finally turned the tide of war.

Hitler raged at lack of sacrifice

When the news of Paulus's surrender reached Wolf's Lair on 31st January, Hitler's face turned red with rage. Hours later, the Führer still hadn't calmed down when he gathered his staff around the conference room table.

"In peacetime Germany, about 18,000 or 20,000 people a year chose to commit suicide, even without being in such a position. Here is a man who sees 50,000 or 60,000 of his soldiers die defending themselves bravely to the end. How can he surrender himself to the Bolsheviks?" blasted the Führer.

The fact that the German Army had lost over a quarter of a million soldiers since the Soviet encirclement was of less real concern to Hitler than the fact that Paulus had not taken his own life.

"But I had my doubts before. That was at the moment when I received the report that he was asking me what he should do," the Führer continued his tirade. He referred to the fact that after receiving the Soviet ultimatum on 8th January, Paulus had asked for advice on his next military move. *"How could he ever ask about such a thing? ... When you have a revolver it's quite easy. How cowardly you must be to flinch before such a deed! It would be better to allow yourself to be buried alive! It's even worse. Paulus was in a position where he knew that his death would make the other pocket resist even more fiercely. When you give the sort of example he has given, you can't expect men to go on fighting."*

Hitler bitterly regretted the appointment of Paulus as field marshal. The ruse to get the commander to blow his brains out had backfired and magnified the enemy's triumph. In front of his staff, the Führer declared the mistake wouldn't be repeated: *"In this war, no more field*

marshals will be made. I won't go on counting my chickens before they are hatched."

Nowhere in the Führer's immediate analysis was there room for self-inspection. The soldiers of the 6th Army had been sacrificed solely because of Hitler's obsession with humiliating Stalin at Stalingrad. Ten years after the war, German military historian Hans Doerr was crystal clear in his verdict:

"Stalingrad has to enter history as the greatest mistake ever committed by military"

Families' uncertainty continued after battle

Even after the battle was lost, the torment continued for troops' families. Many were left not knowing the fate of their sons.

Munich, 31.5.43

Dear Mr Oehus,

Now that I have seen the pictures of your son, I remember him quite clearly. Knowing only the name, I could do nothing.

As I already wrote in my last letter, I can only say so much about your son, that he was still alive on 22nd January 1943 – the day I was wounded and transported out.

Unfortunately, I do not know what became of him and all his comrades. I assume, however, that he is in Russian captivity. For on 22nd January, the remnants of our platoon, including your son, moved to the city of Stalingrad itself, where we had built very good bunkers that could withstand a little bit of everything.

So there is hope that your son is still alive. Although he will not have an easy life in captivity with the Russians, the prospect that he is still alive and may still be able to return at the end of the war may be a comfort to you and your dear family to hold on to until everything is cleared up after the war is over.

If you have any other questions that I can answer for you, please do not hesitate to contact me. As far as it is in my power, I will be happy to help you.

Greetings and all the best!
Yours, F Osthoff



The family never heard from their son Rudolf again, and his fate was uncertain. A memorial and letters from Stalingrad are all that remain of the war.

Stalingrad was so devastated that the Soviets considered rebuilding the city elsewhere.

commanders, as the greatest disdain to the live organism of the army ever demonstrated by the leadership of the country," he wrote about the campaign.

However, during a meeting with General Erich von Manstein in Wolf's Lair on 5th February 1943, Hitler came close to taking the blame for the failure of Stalingrad. But he did not believe that the defeat was due to his strategy.

"As for Stalingrad, I alone bear the responsibility. I might perhaps say that Göring gave me an inaccurate picture of the Luftwaffe's capabilities of supplying the army from the air and so I could possibly make him take some of the blame. But I myself have appointed him to succeed me and so I must accept the responsibility entirely myself," Hitler said, according to Manstein. Thus the Führer elegantly transferred blame for the defeat to Hermann Göring.

Stalingrad ravaged by war for years

For the first time since the initial German aerial bombardments in August 1942, Stalingrad lay still. Almost six months of hell had been replaced by a sense of redemption. As the fighting finally ended, the few remaining civilians cautiously crept out of their hiding places and shared their joy with their liberators. For soldier Alexander Lukash, one of the few to have fought and survived in Stalingrad since September, the final day of liberation, 2nd February 1943, seemed magical:

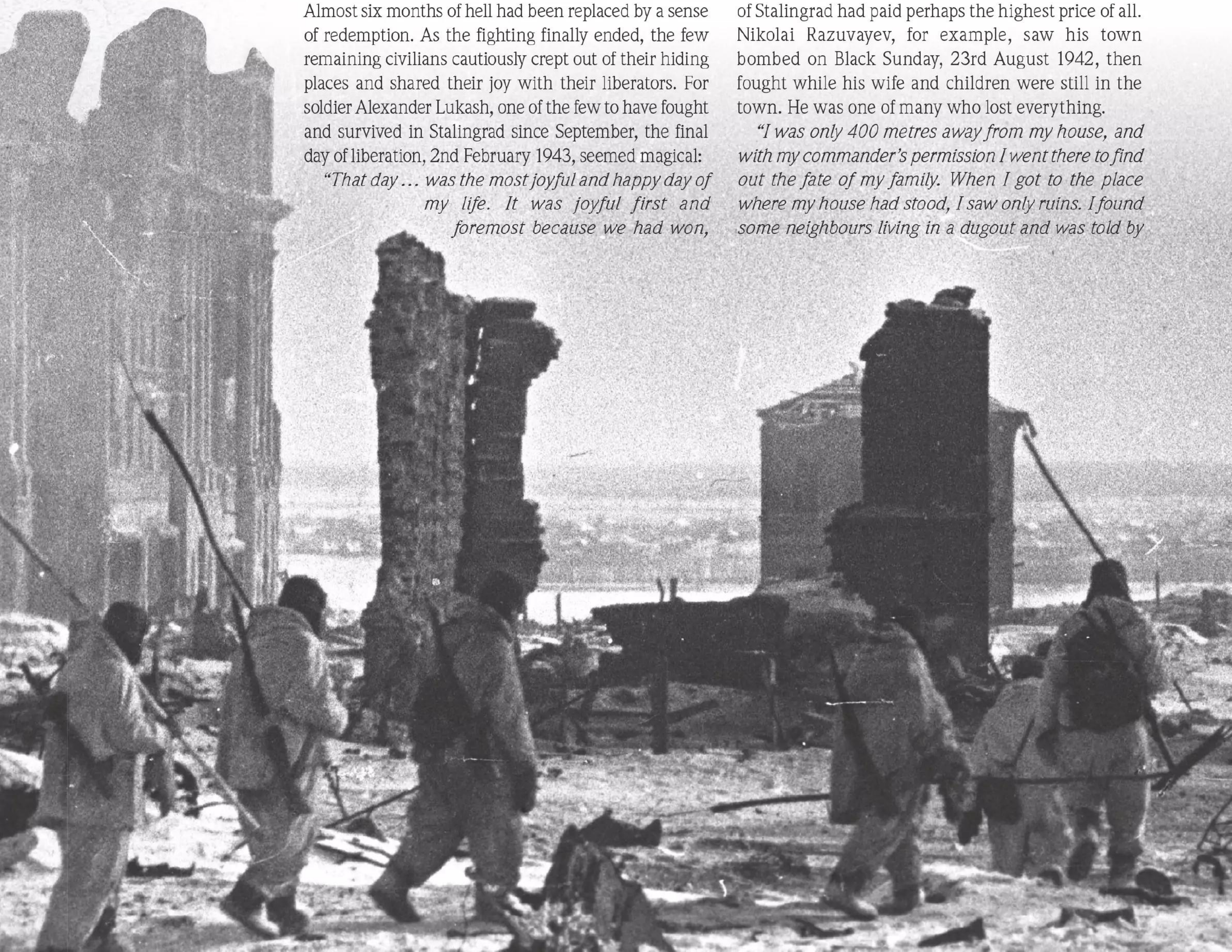
"That day ... was the most joyful and happy day of my life. It was joyful first and foremost because we had won,

we had defended the city of Stalingrad and held on to it. But I was happy too because I had come out of that inferno alive, and I was not the only one who was celebrating. I saw men weep, young ones and grey-haired elderly ones. Everywhere people were embracing and kissing each other. How sad that so many did not live to see that day," he said later.

The price of defending the city had been enormous. According to General Andrey Yermenko, the Soviets lost just 46,700 troops, but subsequent, far more credible estimates put the Soviet casualty figure at something close to ten times that. But in Moscow, the leadership did not count success in lives spared. They calculated victory in the enemy's loss of men – and loss of face. The triumph at Stalingrad was a prestigious victory, and an undeniable turning point for the Red Army. For the first time in the war, Soviet troops were in no doubt that they could defeat the Germans and they were ready to surge on to Berlin.

As the Red Army continued its westward march to reclaim the rest of the motherland, residents began returning to their war-torn hometowns. The citizens of Stalingrad had paid perhaps the highest price of all. Nikolai Razuvayev, for example, saw his town bombed on Black Sunday, 23rd August 1942, then fought while his wife and children were still in the town. He was one of many who lost everything.

"I was only 400 metres away from my house, and with my commander's permission I went there to find out the fate of my family. When I got to the place where my house had stood, I saw only ruins. I found some neighbours living in a dugout and was told by



them that my whole family – my wife and two daughters – were dead. My younger daughter Galya had been killed along with her mother by an exploding shell, which had injured my elder daughter, Lyuba, who was eight years old. She had passed away only ten days before my arrival. A neighbour told me that my daughter kept saying that she was sure her dad would be coming to get her. She had waited and waited, but never lived to see that day.”

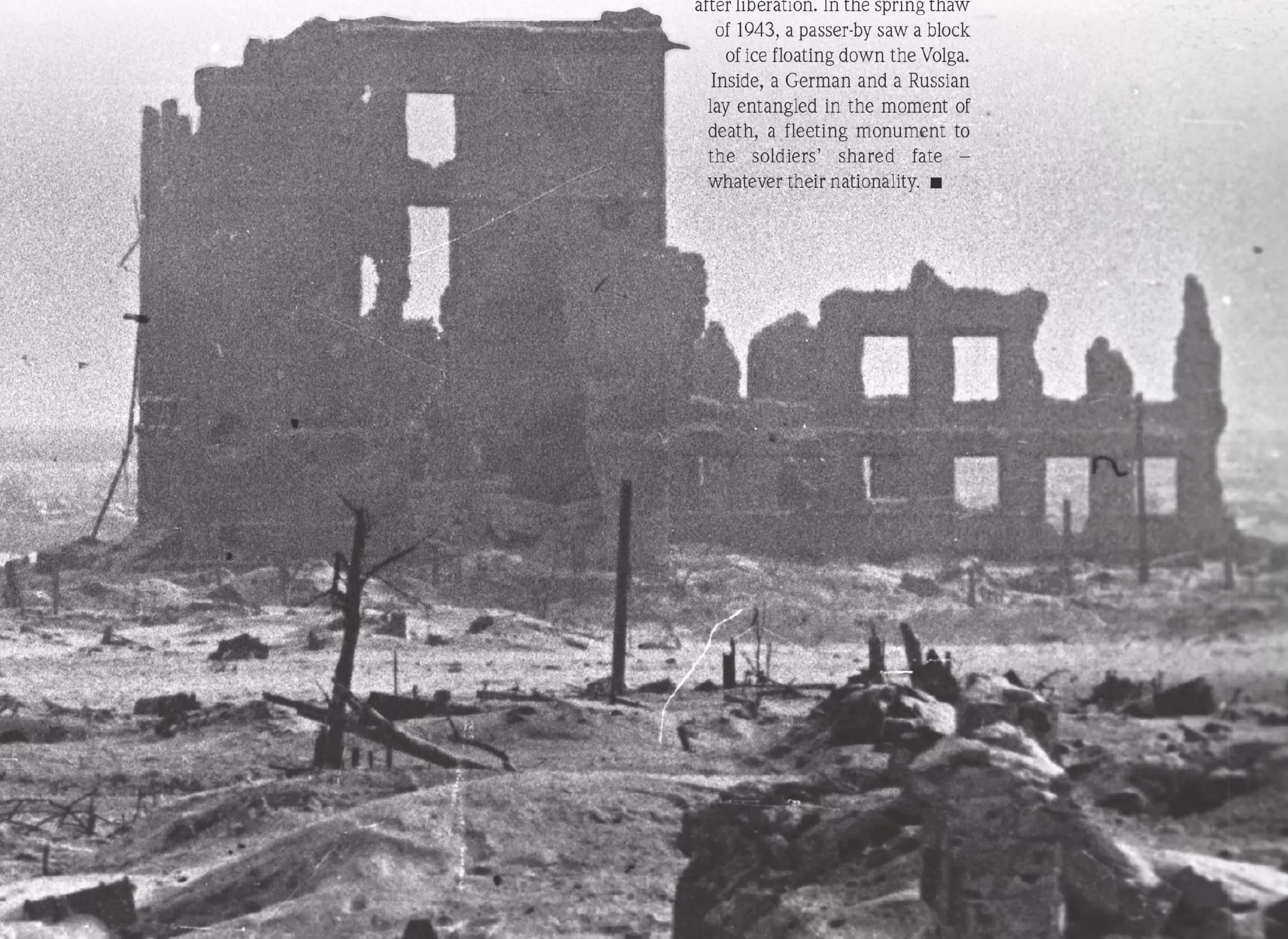
How many civilians lost their lives to shelling, starvation and cold is unknown, but the figure must be in the tens of thousands. Their frozen bodies littered the city after its liberation, second only in number to the hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers.

“We gathered our own dead, but the Germans were left frozen on the ground,” recalled one woman, with little disguised joy. “They were everywhere. I was a driver and carried boxes of artillery shells in my lorry. I could hear their skulls crack beneath my wheel. Bones, too. And I was glad.”

Only when the frost began to loosen its grip on Stalingrad, and the stench of death pervaded the air, were the bodies of the German soldiers taken away

and buried. The city, however, would always be associated with the horrors of battle. Around the town, relics from the war continued to turn up. Mamayev Kurgan in the centre of the city was barren and black with gunpowder for a year after liberation. In the spring thaw of 1943, a passer-by saw a block of ice floating down the Volga. Inside, a German and a Russian lay entangled in the moment of death, a fleeting monument to the soldiers’ shared fate – whatever their nationality. ■

The Sword of Stalingrad was forged in Britain after the battle and given as a symbolic tribute to the city’s defenders.





Hitler orders the attack on Kursk

On 15th April 1943, Hitler decided that the first offensive of the spring would be Operation Citadel, a push against the Kursk salient. The offensive's aims and principles were detailed in Operational Order No. 6.

Throughout the war, Hitler issued a series of Operational Orders. Number six contained only one plan: the coming attack at Kursk. Here are excerpts of the order, which can be read in full in David M Glantz's *The Battle of Kursk*.



Berlin 15th April 1943

ADOLF HITLER

I have decided that the first of this year's attacks, as soon as the weather permits, is Operation Citadel. This attack is of the utmost importance. It must be executed quickly. It must seize the initiative for us in the spring and summer. Therefore, all preparations must be conducted with great circumspection and enterprise. The best formations, the best weapons, the best commanders, and great stocks of ammunition must be committed in the main efforts. Each commander and each man must be impressed with the decisive significance of this offensive. The victory at Kursk must be a signal to all the world. I hereby order:

1. The objective of this offensive is to encircle enemy forces located in the Kursk area by means of rapid and concentrated attacks of shock armies from the Belgorod area and south of Orel and to annihilate the enemy in concentrated attacks. During the offensive a new abbreviated front, which will save strength, will be established along the line: Nezhegol-Korocho sector—Skorodnoye—Tim — east of Shchigry-Sosna sector.
2. We must insure that
 - a. The element of surprise is preserved and the enemy be kept in the dark as to when the attack will begin.
 - b. The attack forces are concentrated on a narrow axis, in order to provide local overwhelming superiority of all attack means (tanks, assault guns, artillery, rocket launchers, etc.) to insure contact between the two attacking armies and closure of the pocket.
 - c. The attack wedge is followed by forces from the depths to protect the flanks, so that the attack wedge itself will only have to be concerned with advancing.
 - d. By prompt compression of the pocket, the enemy will be given no respite and will be destroyed.
 - e. The attack is conducted so quickly that the enemy will be denied the opportunity of either breaking out of encirclement or of deploying strong reserves from other fronts.

ORIGINAL SCHEDULE:

The attack must be carried out quickly, as soon as the roads allow. In this way, the Germans could use Operation Citadel to seize the initiative and then plan the rest of their campaign for summer 1943. Operation Citadel is the only German order of attack on the Eastern Front.

STRATEGY IS CLEAR:

The Germans plan a pincer manoeuvre with attacks from north and south to surround the Soviets. As a bonus, the front line would be shortened, and thousands of German POW troops freed.

BLITZKRIEG LIVES ON:

The concentration of planes, tanks and guns recalls Blitzkrieg tactics. In the first three years of the war, Germany used this method repeatedly to punch holes in the enemy's defences.

SOVIETS MUST BE CAPTURED:

The crucial thing is that the Soviet soldiers do not have time to escape. Only by capturing large numbers of the enemy can the Germans weaken the Red Army and prevent a counter-attack.



f. Additional forces, particularly mobile formations, are freed up by quickly constructing a new front.

3. Army Group South will jump off with strongly concentrated forces from the Belgorod-Tomarovka line, break through the Prilepy-Oboyan line, and link up with the attacking armies of Army Group Centre east of Kursk. The line Nezhegol-Korocha sector—Skorodnoye-Tim must be reached as soon as possible to protect the attack from the east without jeopardising the concentration of forces on the main effort in the direction of Prilepy-Oboyan. Forces will be committed to protect the attack in the west; they will later be used to attack into the pocket.

5. The preparation of both army groups' forces is to be conducted under the best deception measures possible and far removed from jumping-off positions. The earliest date for the attack will be 3rd May. The march to jumping-off positions will be conducted only at night under as much cover as possible.

7. To ensure secrecy only those persons who absolutely need to know will be informed of the plan. These instructions will be passed down to lower echelons as late as possible. In any case, these plans must not be betrayed by carelessness or neglect. Furthermore, enemy espionage will be combated by reinforced Abwehr agencies.

10. The Luftwaffe will likewise commit all of its available forces on the main effort. Coordination with Luftwaffe commands will begin immediately. Special attention will be afforded in order to maintain secrecy.

11. For the success of the attack it is mandatory that the enemy does not succeed in forcing the transfer of attack formations from Citadel by attacking other Army Group South and Army Group Centre sectors. Therefore, just as they are preparing for the Citadel offensive battle, until the end of the month, both army groups must systematically prepare for defensive battle in remaining threatened front sectors. Therefore, the construction of defensive positions

AVOID COUNTER-ATTACKS:

The success of the operation depends on a stable front line. Any Soviet attack must therefore be repelled before and during Operation Citadel.

KURSK NOT A TARGET:

The German armies are supposed to meet east of Kursk. The city, after which the battle is named, is not named as a strategic target.

is to be hastened, the sectors threatened by tanks must be equipped with sufficient antitank weapons, local reserves have to be prepared, enemy's main axes have to be determined early through brisk reconnaissance, etc.

12. The final objectives of the operation are:

a. The shifting of the boundary line between Army Groups South and Centre to the general line Konotop (South)—Kursk (South)—Dolgoe (Centre).

b. The transfer of the 2nd Army with three corps and nine infantry divisions, as well as the attached Heeres troops, from Army Group Centre to Army Group South.

c. The assembly of three additional infantry divisions from Army Group Centre to be made available to the OKH in the area north-west of Kursk.

d. The removal of all mobile formations from the front for use elsewhere. Movement, especially that of 2d Army formations, must be adapted to these plans. As planned, during the operation I will initiate the movement to the south-east (Panther) as quickly as possible in order to take advantage of the enemy's confusion.

Adolf Hitler

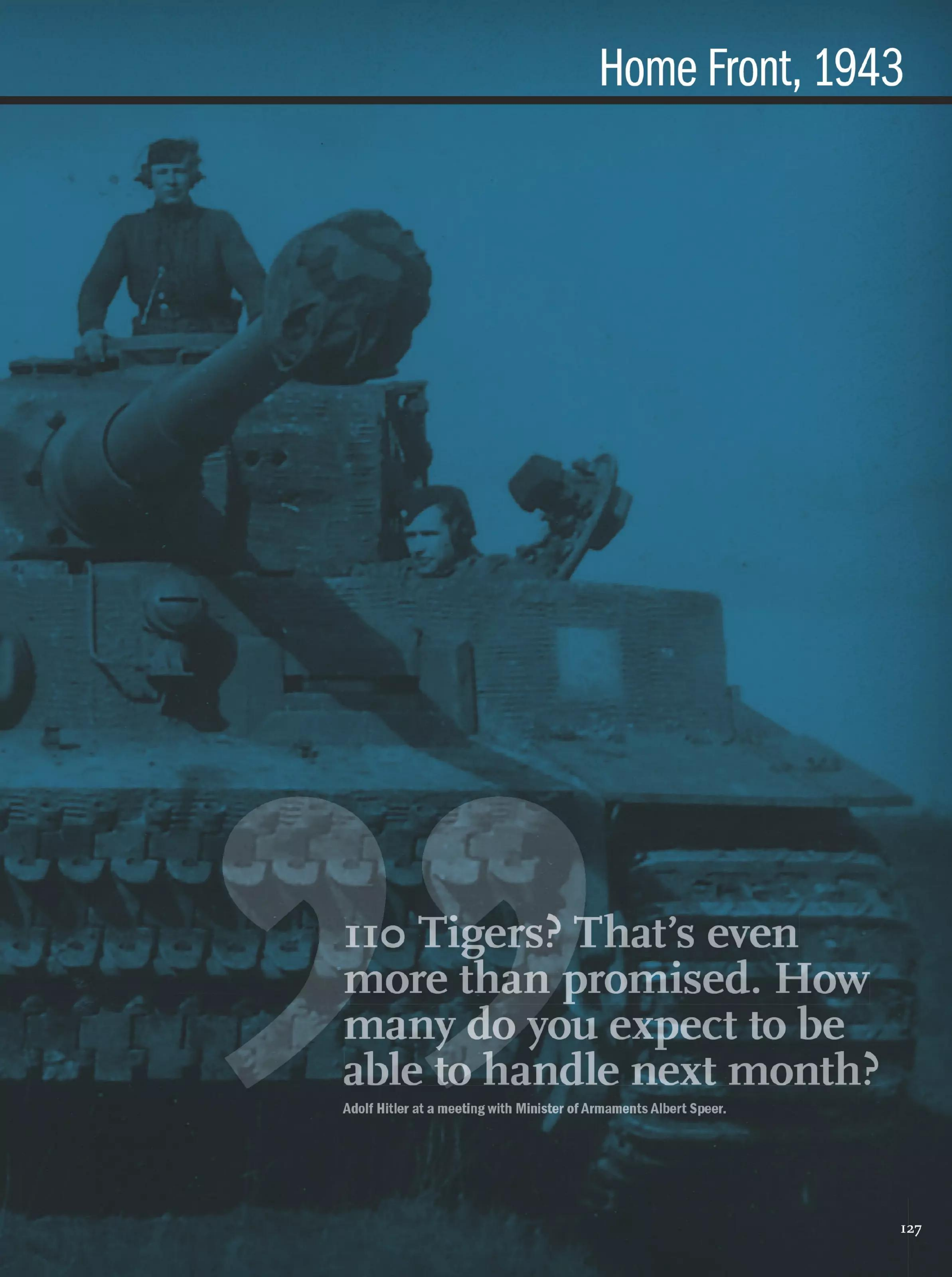
HITLER'S SIGNATURE:

Order No. 6, like other notable orders, was signed by Hitler personally.



ARMS RACE TO DECIDE THE WAR

For two years, the Red Army's T-34 tanks were *superior* to those of the Germans. The monstrous Tiger tank was set to tip the balance and finally rolled off the assembly line just in time for the Battle of Kursk.



110 Tigers? That's even more than promised. How many do you expect to be able to handle next month?

Adolf Hitler at a meeting with Minister of Armaments Albert Speer.

Arms race to decide the war

In 1943 Hitler was nervous. The Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union had become stuck, and he decided that only new wonder weapons could save Germany. Only two things counted to the Führer: size and thick armour. In Moscow, Stalin also dreamed of new weapons to secure victory against German planes and tanks.

By Henrik Nordskilde

Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer was well aware of Hitler's infamous bedtime reading: a large book in red binding with yellow diagonal stripes, containing all the information on the German arsenal the Führer could wish for.

"It was a catalogue, continually being brought up to date, of from 30 to 50 different types of ammunition and ordnance. He kept it on his night table. Sometimes he would order a servant to bring the book down when in the course of military conferences an assistant had mentioned a figure which Hitler instantly corrected. The book was opened and Hitler's data would be confirmed, without fail, every time, while the general would be shown to be in error," Speer later wrote of his meetings with Hitler, where the red book was produced and used to plan new offensives on all fronts as well as control German war production, of which the Führer imagined he knew every detail.

Hitler's ability to memorise numbers created fear among those around him, but otherwise Hitler's powers of recall were of little significance. Often, the Führer's obsession with detail hampered his ability to maintain an overview and lay out a broad strategy for the conduct of the war.

"The real expert sensibly does not burden his mind with details that he can look up or leave to an assistant. Hitler, however, felt it necessary for his own self-esteem to parade his knowledge. But he also enjoyed doing it," Speer recalled.

A review was needed in 1942, when Speer took office as the new armaments minister. German war production was poor and disorganised, and the army was running out of supplies and weapons after gruelling battles on the Eastern Front and in Africa. When Speer took up his post, he may have had his sights set on boosting war production, but he also concentrated on avoiding the Führer's displeasure.

Speer had seen generals fall into the trap so many times that he himself had no desire to be exposed by Hitler's skill for memorising military trivia – never mind his fondness for demonstrating his knowledge. Speer's predecessor, Fritz Todt, who died in a plane crash near Ulveskansen in February 1942, occasionally brought a single expert to meetings with Hitler, but Speer stepped up his game. When the minister of armaments flew every two or three weeks

to Hitler's headquarters at Ulveskansen in East Prussia or in Ukraine, he made sure that he was accompanied by up to 20 civilian advisers, each an expert in his field.

Depending on the topics Hitler raised at meetings, experts were invited to the table to explain details about a particular gun, the armour of a tank or something else entirely. In this way, Speer avoided having to deal with questions he couldn't answer from memory. Even so, he couldn't entirely avoid having to deal with the Führer's wishes for rearmament, which were ambitious but one-sided.

Hitler obsessed by thick armour

In the spring of 1943, German weapons development was at its highest ever. Germany had suffered more



casualties than anyone imagined, and the number of potential recruits was dropping to critical levels. The debilitating war in the Soviet Union demanded new types of weapons that could both save lives and resources, and the thought of not losing any more of his precious tanks haunted Hitler, who never held back from interfering with the engineers' work.

The Führer had opinions on everything from the thickness of tank armour to the range of guns. For example, the newly developed Tiger tank was modified and delayed because Hitler valued armour and firepower over speed and manoeuvrability: in its original design, the Tiger weighed 50 tonnes, but after Hitler's adjustments, the weight was as much as 75 tonnes. As a direct consequence, Speer had to start developing a new, lighter model, which was christened the Panther tank. Weighing only 30 tonnes, combined with the same engine as the Tiger, it was fast and manoeuvrable, as its name suggested. But over the course of a year, Hitler demanded more

and more armour to make the precious tanks invulnerable, and eventually even the little Panther was "fattened up" to weigh 48 tonnes.

This obsession with armour became so fanatical that when Hitler inspected a wooden model of a gigantic tank code-named *Maus* (Mouse) in May 1943, he wanted even more armour on the already unrealistically heavy tank model. The demand was impossible; no engine in the world could pull the huge, heavy tank, which had been designed solely to satisfy Hitler's armour needs. Having demonstrated this, Speer hoped the Führer would then agree to the development of lighter tanks. The *Maus*'s growth also frustrated Inspector General of Armoured Troops Heinz Guderian, who witnessed first-hand the development of other tanks being delayed.

"Its total weight was supposed to be 175 tonnes; it must therefore be assumed that, after Hitler had ordered his usual supplementary changes to the initial design, it would weigh nearer 200►

Albert Speer inspects the front near the Crimea in 1943. As Hitler's armaments minister, Speer tried to understand the army's most important needs.





TANK HUNTER

Panzerkampfwagen V Panther

The (almost) perfect tank

Although the Tiger took the honours, its little brother, the Panther, was the tank the men loved and enemies feared. The tank was fast and heavily armoured, had incredible firepower and only one weakness: its thin side armour.

The Panther tank was developed specifically to take on the Soviet T-34. Although it had some teething problems, particularly with the suspension, both the Germans and their enemies considered the Panther one of the very best tanks of the war.

The German car manufacturers MAN and Daimler-Benz were responsible for its development, prioritising firepower, speed

and armour. Up to 20 tonnes lighter than its big brother, the Tiger, the Panther had the same engine and could reach a top speed of 55 km/h, faster than the smaller T-34 as well as other Allied tanks.

Its relatively light weight also enabled the Panther tank to traverse difficult terrain better than the larger Tiger, while the armament was the same. Indeed, both tanks were equipped

with the most feared gun of the war, the German 88-mm, which was used both on tanks, as a stand-alone gun and for anti-aircraft fire.

The front armour was reinforced, and the Soviet anti-tank crews soon discovered that they could only disable the Panther by hitting it on the side, where the armour layer was somewhat thinner to keep the weight down.

WIDTH: 3.27 metres
HEIGHT: 2.99 metres
WEIGHT: 44 tonnes
FUEL TANK: 720 litres

OPERATIONAL RANGE: 200 km on the road, 150 km off-road.

CREW: The tank had room to accommodate five men – inside were the driver, gunner, commander, radio operator and a loader.

ENGINE: Originally two Porsche engines, later replaced by two 690-hp Maybach engines.



WEAPON: A 6.3-metre 88-mm gun. With standard ammunition, the Panther could pierce 13-cm armour at 2,000 metres. Later, after the Battle of Kursk, the tank was upgraded with two 7.92-mm machine guns and thicker armour.

ARMOUR, FRONT: 10 cm
ARMOUR, SIDE: 3 cm

IN BRITISH SERVICE: After World War II, German factories were ordered to produce Panther tanks for the British Army. So sought after was the German tank that even arch-enemy France chose to use German-made Panther tanks after the war.

tonnes,” wrote Guderian, who also believed the model was missing a crucial weapon: *“But the model displayed carried no machine guns for close-range fighting. For this reason I had to turn it down.”*

According to Guderian’s assessment, it was inevitable that a tank would need a machine gun, especially if it was to work with infantry forces.

“Our discussion grew heated,” Guderian wrote of the incident, where he was the only one in the audience to express his dislike of the monster tank.

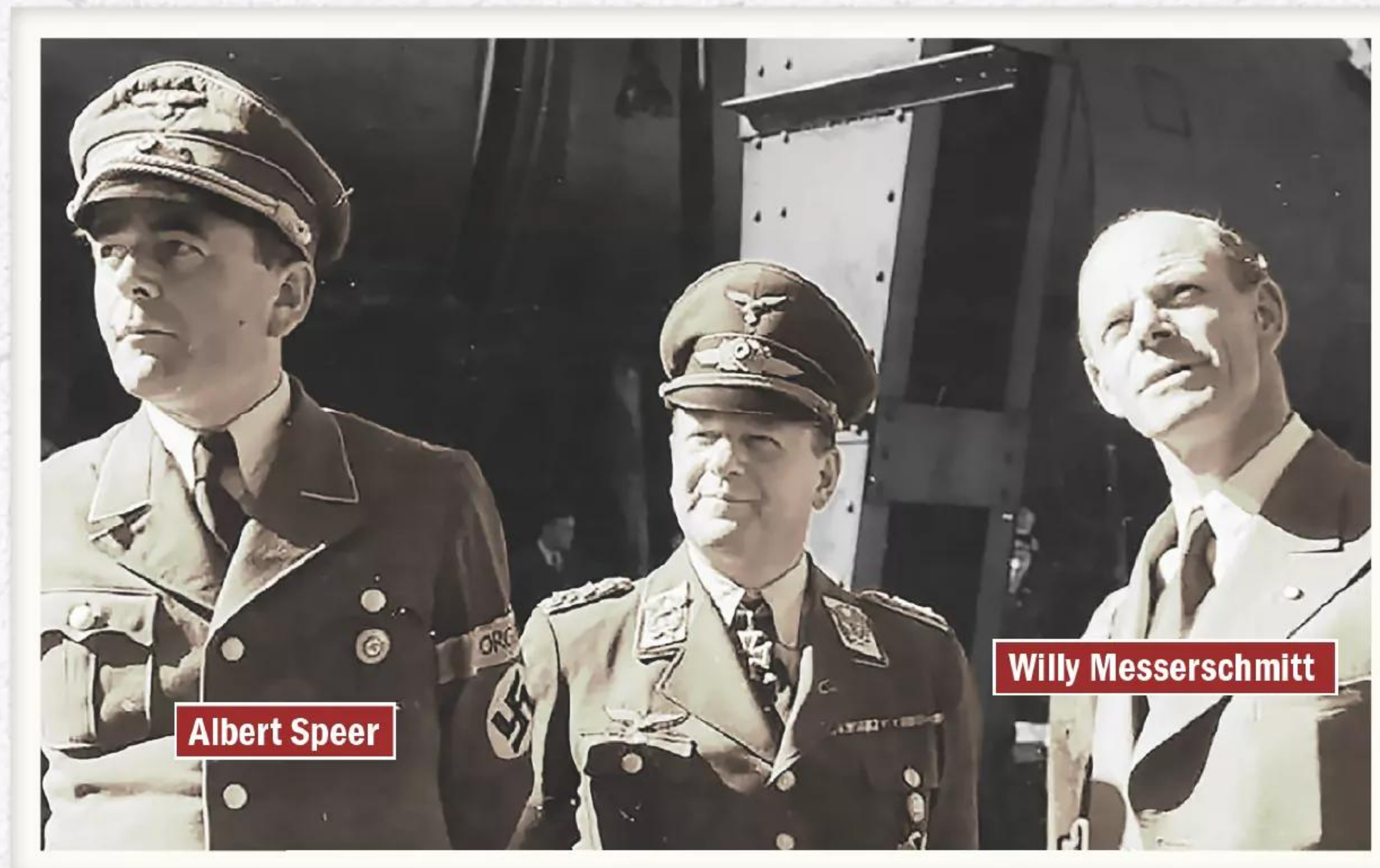
Officers loved speed

Despite Hitler’s infatuation, the Maus never went into production, but these blind alleys delayed the manufacture of the new Tiger and Panther tanks, which Guderian and his fellow generals considered important weapons for turning the tide of war. The Panther, in particular, seemed to offer a good solution for offensive-minded German officers who wanted speed and manoeuvrability.

But even having gained weight from Hitler’s input, the tank was a good weapon; equipped with a 75-mm gun, it could penetrate the armour of the Soviet T-34 tank, and the design was inspired by the sloping armour plates of the T-34, where shells tended to bounce off rather than penetrate on impact. There were, however, several teething problems. Because of its increased weight, the tank had inadequate

suspension, and the vehicle’s heavy steel frame compromised both drive shaft and sight instruments. Guderian advised Hitler against putting the Panther into action on the Eastern Front, and also expressed concerns about the even heavier Tiger.

Guderian estimated that the Tiger was not yet sufficiently tested and also lacked trained manpower with sufficient combat experience. It was too risky to send crews that were not able to fully exploit the ►



Albert Speer inspects new aircraft with chief designer Willy Messerschmitt. In one year, Speer dramatically increased German war production efficiency.

The number of tanks produced by the factories doubled from 5,000 in 1942 to more than 11,000 in 1943.



Vehicles and guns quickly wore out in the Soviet Union's dusty and muddy terrain, where the army lacked spare parts for repairs.



tank's strengths or deal with any weaknesses the tank might have in combat, Guderian argued.

"They were simply not yet ready to go to the front," was the inspector general's assessment of the Panther.

But Guderian had to yield. Hitler was determined that both the Panther and Tiger would play a decisive role in the attack on the Kursk salient, and by May 1943 production of Tigers was increased sixfold compared to when the first ones left the factories in August 1942. At the same time, the Panther was close to going into production.

Hitler had unrealistic expectations

Although the Tiger and Panther were close to being sent to the front, the new tanks did not satisfy Hitler's need for new weapons. The Führer demanded further development and scaling up to mass production of the new weapons in the spring of 1943, when everything was

at stake. The Führer's demands put pressure on the arms industry, and Speer was forced to run numerous projects in parallel. In his autobiography, Speer described how Chief of the Army Staff Walther Buhle experienced Hitler's insistence on new production, especially heavy tanks and guns, during a meeting, and how the general listened incredulously to Hitler's expectations of production time and numbers that the factories could churn out.

"Hitler sent for General Buhle and demanded: 'I have just heard that an enemy tank is coming along with armour far beyond anything we have. Have you any documentation of that? If it is true, a new anti-tank gun must be developed instantly. We must begin reacting immediately. Instantly.'"

In his eagerness, the Führer summoned Speer every month to receive the latest production figures. Speer always recited them in a certain order so that Hitler could write the figures meticulously in a table and record the most important figures in his red book.

Speer later described the conversations:

"Hitler usually received them with exclamations such as: 'Very good! Why, that's wonderful. 110 Tigers? That's more than you promised... And how many Tigers do you think you'll manage next month? Every tank is important now...'"

At a meeting in February 1943, Hitler spoke of his great expectations for a self-propelled gun called the Ferdinand and, of



ALBERT SPEER (1905-1981)

was appointed minister of armaments in 1942 and was responsible for Germany's war production in its most crucial years. A close friend of Adolf Hitler, Speer had been a member of the Nazi Party and its chief architect since 1931. Speer was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his role in the war at the Nuremberg trials in 1946.



By early May, we'll have 98 heavy self-propelled guns built by Porsche. ■ Hitler's expectant boast about German rearmament in 1943.

course, the Tiger and Panther tanks. He claimed that by early May there would be 98 heavy self-propelled guns built by Porsche, plus 150 new Tiger tanks and 200-250 Panther tanks. As if that weren't enough, Hitler also predicted another 50 heavy self-propelled infantry guns, 100 tanks with flamethrowers and a number of Panzer IV tanks. Hitler boasted of the weapons' indestructibility and unmatched firepower, claiming Porsche's gun could disable an enemy tank at 2,000 metres. With this huge build-up of the latest weapons, he argued, it must be possible to regain the initiative on the Eastern Front.

Hitler prioritised new tanks over parts

Albert Speer and Heinz Guderian occasionally spoke about their frustrations with Hitler's one-sided focus on mass production of new tanks and guns. He was less concerned with the need to produce and supply spare parts quickly enough.

"General Guderian ... frequently pointed out to me that if we could repair our tanks quickly, thanks to sufficient spare parts, we could have

more available for battle, at a fraction of the cost, than by producing new ones. But Hitler insisted on the priority of new production, which would have had to be reduced by 20 percent if we made provision for such repairs."

Such a reduction in production was unacceptable to Hitler. Speer soon learned that his boss was more interested in talking about production and the development of new weapons than what happened on the battlefield. Especially when bad news arrived from the front, as it often did in 1942-43.

"It often seemed to me that Hitler used these prolonged conferences on armaments and war production as an escape from his military responsibilities. He admitted that he found them a relaxation similar to our former conferences on architecture. Even in crisis situations, he devoted many hours to such discussions, sometimes refusing to interrupt them even when his field marshals or ministers urgently wanted to speak with him."

By 1943, Germany was at the limit of its capacity to produce munitions, and Speer began advocating ►



The Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighter began to replace the Messerschmitt during 1942. The new machine had superior weaponry and manoeuvrability compared to its predecessor.

In the spring of 1943, Speer had an acute problem keeping the wheels of the arms industry turning.

that industry in German-occupied countries help with weapons production. Specifically, those factories in Eastern Europe, France, the Netherlands and Belgium capable of producing consumer goods such as clothing and furniture for the German civilian population. In this way, Speer could free up resources in the German factories, which would then have room to concentrate on arms production.

At first, the plans did not curry much support from Hitler, who actually had opposing ideas when it came to production in occupied countries. The Führer dreamt of deindustrialising Eastern Europe in particular, where he believed industrialisation promoted Communism and created an undesirable group of intellectuals. Later Hitler changed his mind, but by spring 1943, Speer had an acute problem keeping the wheels of the arms industry turning. German factories were largely engaged in producing goods for the civilian population, while the war demanded tanks, submarines and other resource-intensive materiel. On top of this, a shortage of labour for the factories was becoming acute.

Chance remark saved the war industry

Speer found a solution to the labour shortage during a modest dinner in the back room of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. Here the armaments minister heard a remark that concerned and interested him. The head of Hitler's bodyguards, Sepp Dietrich, was present and mentioned that the Führer was ready to issue an order that no prisoners be taken in connection with the attack at Kursk. SS troops had shortly before reported to the Führer that the Red Army had killed German prisoners of war, and Hitler immediately declared that the enemy must repay in blood by the thousand. Speer sat shocked at the dinner table when he heard what Dietrich had said. The prospect of so many prisoners being executed

seemed pointless when they could instead be put to work in Germany. Here, the Nazis had already been 'creative' in boosting production. Even before the outbreak of war, Germany had established labour camps staffed by Jews, Communists, homosexuals, criminals and the homeless. In Poland alone, the Nazis set up 457 camps, just as a large number of German companies used slave labour. Together, the forced labourers made up a quarter of the workforce, but there was still a shortage of hands, so Speer decided to intervene after hearing that Soviet prisoners of war at Kursk would be shot on the spot.

"Hitler was counting on hundreds of thousands of prisoners. For months we had been trying in vain to close a gap of hundreds of thousands in the supply of labour. I therefore took the first opportunity to reason with Hitler on this score. It was not difficult to persuade him to reconsider; he seemed rather relieved... That same day, 8th July 1943, he had Keitel prepare instructions to the effect that all prisoners must be sent into armaments production."

Now the goal was the opposite of the original plan. For the army, it became about taking as many prisoners as possible to help with production. Soviet civilians from German-occupied areas were also included in the calculations, all so Speer could secure enough workers. In what was dubbed the Eastern Workers Programme, civilians were 'evacuated' from the Soviet Union to serve as slave labourers in German industry.

In 1943, Olga, a Ukrainian girl in her late teens, wrote in her diary about the day she and her sister were told they were to be sent from her home town, Znamianka, to Germany. First, the girls had to undergo a medical examination to determine their suitability for forced labour.

"Oh! What a horror... What is happening to me? I am like a crazy person, screaming at everyone and cursing my dear mother... But here I am at the doctor's... [My sister] will not have to go... But what about me?"

Before the investigation, Olga, like many others, considered drastic measures to avoid being sent away. Between February 1942 and July 1943, more than 1,000 young people in the city harmed themselves, while 1,121 others ended up in German factories.

"I am going to make myself sick only so that I cannot pass the commission and will not have to go THERE! Oh! If only all of these woes would soon end! Well I am not really afraid to go but if it weren't for my mother, father... They do not want to make me drink poison! To drink cooked tobacco so that I become unhealthy."

Luckily, however, Olga managed to convince a doctor to agree that she had to stay in her home town for health reasons. The prisoners sent to Germany ►

Hitler had several headquarters close to the front. Here he meets with air force officers in Ukraine to get an update.



WHY THE GERMAN ARMS INDUSTRY WAS...

...not prepared for a long war

Nazi leaders were both proponents of short wars and convinced that Germany's modern army and superior generals could crush any enemy in a matter of months. They therefore saw no need for the massive production of new equipment.

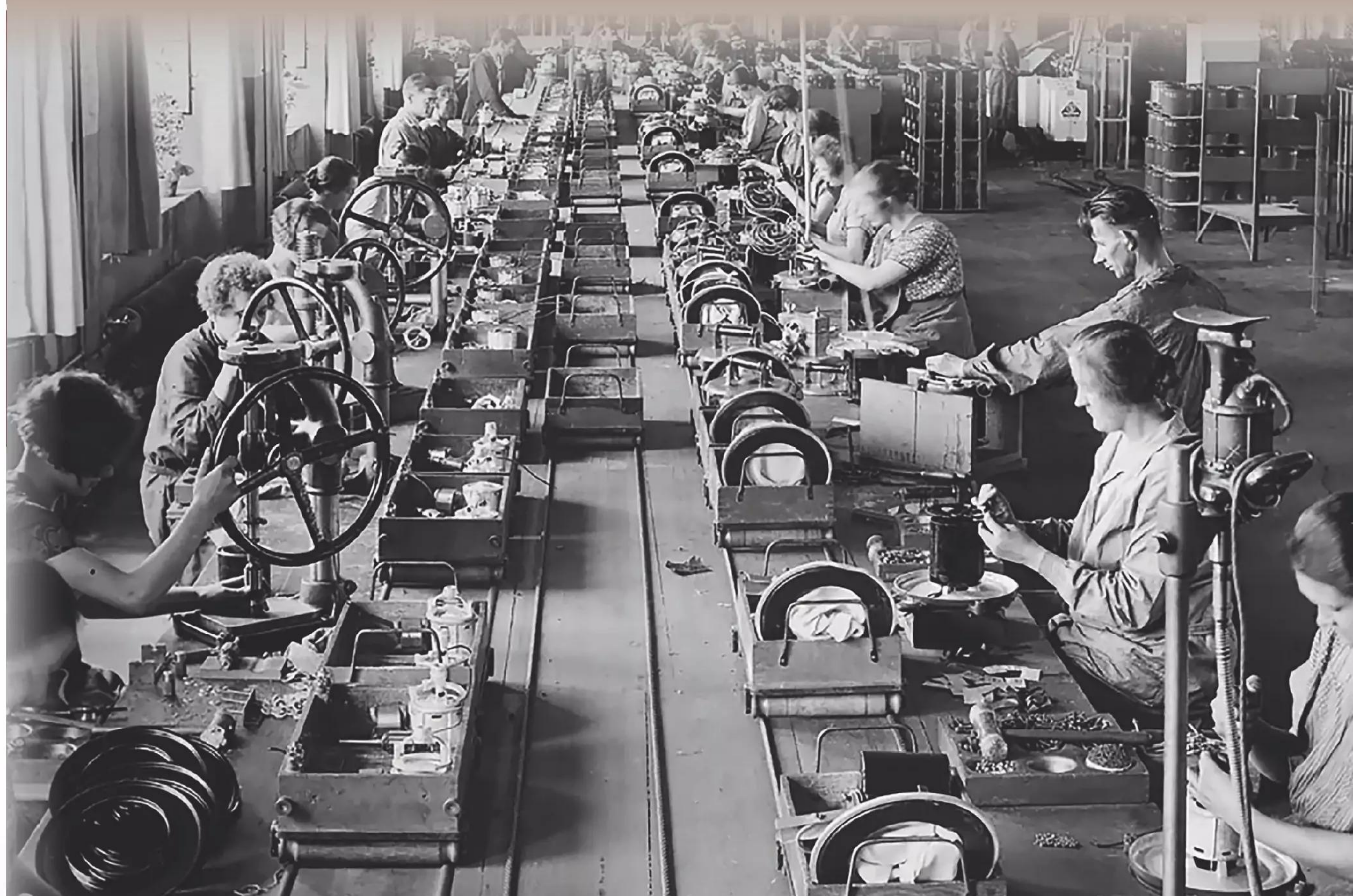
At the beginning of World War II, the German armaments industry was not very large compared to later in the war. Some historians argue the slow start was due to Hitler's long-held belief that all wars could be won quickly. Therefore, Germany did not need to devote large resources to the production of weapons and equipment for a protracted war. The Germans did indeed manage to occupy most of Western Europe without putting much strain on industry, but with the Soviet campaign and its

exhausting need for supplies, by 1942 Germany was dangerously close to running out of tanks, planes, guns and ammunition. As the war went from bad to worse for the Germans, a greater proportion of industry was dedicated to war production, and targeted so that each factory had a very specific role.

In 1942, when Albert Speer became minister of armaments, the Germans felt the pressure on the Eastern Front just as the United States entered the war. As a result,

Germany had to speed up its factories, and by the end of the year a third of industrial output was weapons production. From there the country switched to a full war economy, with virtually all production devoted to the armaments industry. Civilian goods had to be given lower priority – clothing, for example, was phased out. Instead, centres were set up where citizens could barter for clothes. The new priorities helped. From 1942 to 1944, German war production doubled.

Women took the men's place in factories. But only slowly, as Nazi ideals steered women towards looking after homes and children.



Everyday life on the Eastern Front

Throughout the spring and early summer of 1943, the Eastern Front was quiet. For the soldiers, the peace enabled them to enjoy plays, concerts and, for the lucky ones, even love. But only for a few months.

On 15th March 1943, German troops retook Kharkov in eastern Ukraine, ending the Soviet winter offensive. Since the Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans had been on the back foot, but now a strange peace settled over the thousands of kilometres of front

line. Both Germans and Soviets gathered strength after the exhaustive fighting, and a kind of peaceful everyday life settled in for soldiers on both sides of the front.

While the two armies awaited new recruits and weapons for the next offensive, soldiers enjoyed the spring sunshine in the trenches and were entertained by performances from famous actors and singers who were ferried by plane and train

from Moscow and Berlin to the quiet front more than 1,000 km away.

Love also flourished – albeit from a distance. Soldiers could arrange long-distance weddings, where bride and groom said yes to each other at the same time and with the same words as at a normal wedding. The marriage triggered no special bonuses or holidays, but still brought joy to the German soldiers in the Soviet Union for some rare quiet months.



Field priests and officers performed long-distance weddings in their thousands in June 1943. In addition to boosting soldiers' morale, the marriages ensured that lovers in Germany received a pension if their new husbands died at the front.

were not only used in the production of tanks, guns and submarines. The Luftwaffe also required factories to supply new equipment. During the Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans lost air supremacy for the first time; 500 planes were shot down, and the losses meant not only a lack of aircraft, but also a shortage of experienced pilots. In the Soviet attack that formed the advance at Kursk, the Soviets had 2,000 aircraft to the Germans' 400.

Yet the Germans believed they had a trump card. The Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighter, developed in 1939 and put into service in 1941, had proved to be one of the best fighters of World War II. It was fast, with a top speed of 660 km/h, and could compete with enemy fighters such as the Spitfire. At the same time, with two 7.9-mm machine guns in the nose and a pair of twin 20-mm autocannons in each wing, the aircraft was heavily armed and suitable for attacks against ground targets. The machine could even be adapted to carry up to four additional 20-mm cannons, mortars or 500-kg bombs. In addition, the Fw 190 had a wide landing gear, which made the aircraft more stable when landing on uneven runways in war zones, as well as an air-cooled engine – a rarity on the battlefield.

Not all engineers were in favour of air-cooled engines in fighter aircraft. Normally, it would be necessary to leave a large part of the front of the aircraft open to ensure sufficient airflow and thus cooling. Such a design created considerable wind resistance, but the man who created Focke-Wulf, engineer and test pilot Kurt Tank, had solved the problem, in part by using a hole in the nose from which air was directed into the engine.

The solution ensured that the German pilots had the increased security of an air-cooled engine. While a single projectile in a water-cooled engine could puncture the entire system and cause the engine to overheat, the Focke-Wulf Fw 190 could continue flying even if its engine was hit. Kurt Tank's desire to create a safer machine stemmed from personal experience:

"During World War I, I served in the cavalry and in the infantry. I had seen the harsh conditions under which military equipment had to work in wartime. I felt sure that a quite different breed of fighter would also have a place in any future conflict: one that could operate from ill-prepared front-line airfields; one that could be flown and maintained by men who had received only short training; and one that could absorb a reasonable amount of battle damage and still get back."

Soviets knew Hitler's secret

Despite having been outnumbered in previous summer offensives yet still managing to push the Red Army back, there was good reason for extra preparation before the attack at the Kursk pocket. The army had lost nearly 8,000 tanks since June 1941 and

by the end of January 1943 had only 495 operational tanks spread across the Eastern Front. Reinforcements did arrive, but during the first three months of 1943 alone, the Germans lost a further 2,529 tanks. Most of them were Panzer III and IV, which despite upgrades were no match for the Soviet T-34 model.

At one point, German General Gerd von Rundstedt called the T-34 the world's best tank, but by 1943 it was inferior to the firepower of the gun on a Tiger – the tank that Hitler, along with the Panther, relied on.

The Soviets – without the knowledge of the Germans – had strong intelligence about the two new tanks and were particularly aware of the thick armour of the Tiger. T-34 crews were trained not to fire at them from too far away. The official reason was to save ammunition, but the reality – unknown to the crews – was that the T-34's gun could not penetrate the armour of a Tiger tank unless it fired from a very specific angle and at only a few hundred metres' range.

Conversely, a Tiger could disable a T-34 from up to 1,500 metres away. On the other hand, the T-34, with its low weight and wide caterpillar feet, was perfect on soft ground. This was especially important because, twice a year on the Eastern Front, there were periods when the ground turned to mud after snowmelt in spring and heavy rains in autumn. In addition, the T-34's sloping armour plates made it resistant to shelling – shells bounced off the sloped plates or did not penetrate completely because the ►

During the month of June, soldiers put away their weapons and uniform jackets and instead relaxed and recharged their batteries.



shell had to travel through more centimetres of the sloping armour than if it hit a vertical surface. The T-34 was also fast, constructed using simple mechanics that made it easy to both produce and repair, plus it enjoyed a wide range of action. In other words, it was Stalin's wonder weapon.

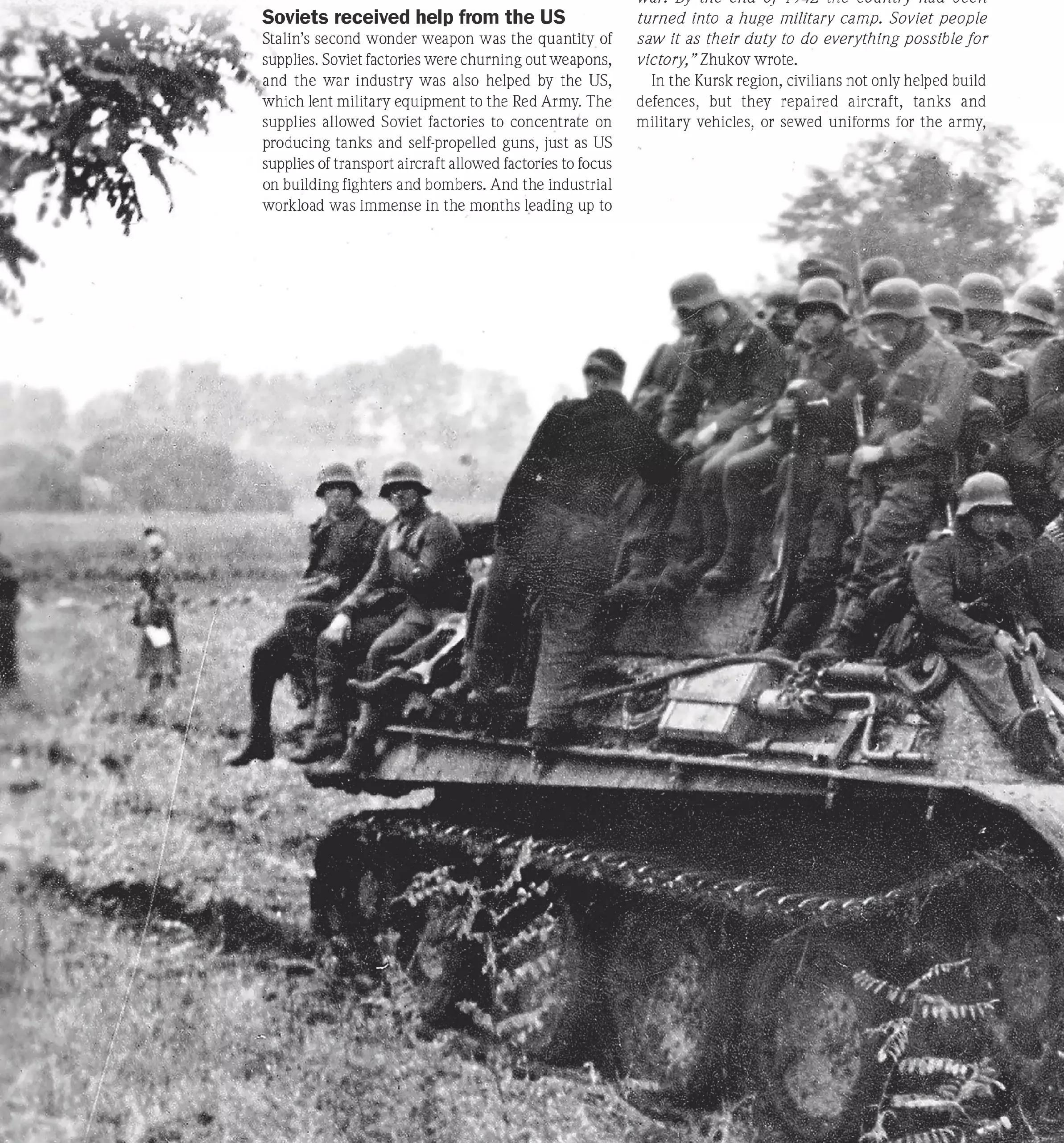
Soviets received help from the US

Stalin's second wonder weapon was the quantity of supplies. Soviet factories were churning out weapons, and the war industry was also helped by the US, which lent military equipment to the Red Army. The supplies allowed Soviet factories to concentrate on producing tanks and self-propelled guns, just as US supplies of transport aircraft allowed factories to focus on building fighters and bombers. And the industrial workload was immense in the months leading up to

Operation Citadel, if Georgy Zhukov, marshal of the Soviet Union, was to be believed:

"Despite the loss of a substantial part of the crucial economic areas, of their factories and mills, our people laboured selflessly to provide the Soviet armies with the necessary means of waging war. By the end of 1942 the country had been turned into a huge military camp. Soviet people saw it as their duty to do everything possible for victory," Zhukov wrote.

In the Kursk region, civilians not only helped build defences, but they repaired aircraft, tanks and military vehicles, or sewed uniforms for the army,



too. Zhukov later described civilians' efforts and their importance in grand terms:

"Each person did everything he or she possibly could to contribute to victory. The community of the goals of our people and the Armed Forces in the fight to save their socialist Motherland was thereby manifested... In May and June intensive preparations were being made for battle among all the troops serving on the ground and in the air, every single man and officer getting ready to meet the enemy. And this encounter soon took place..."

On 4th July, late in the evening, several captured Germans reported that the German Kursk offensive was

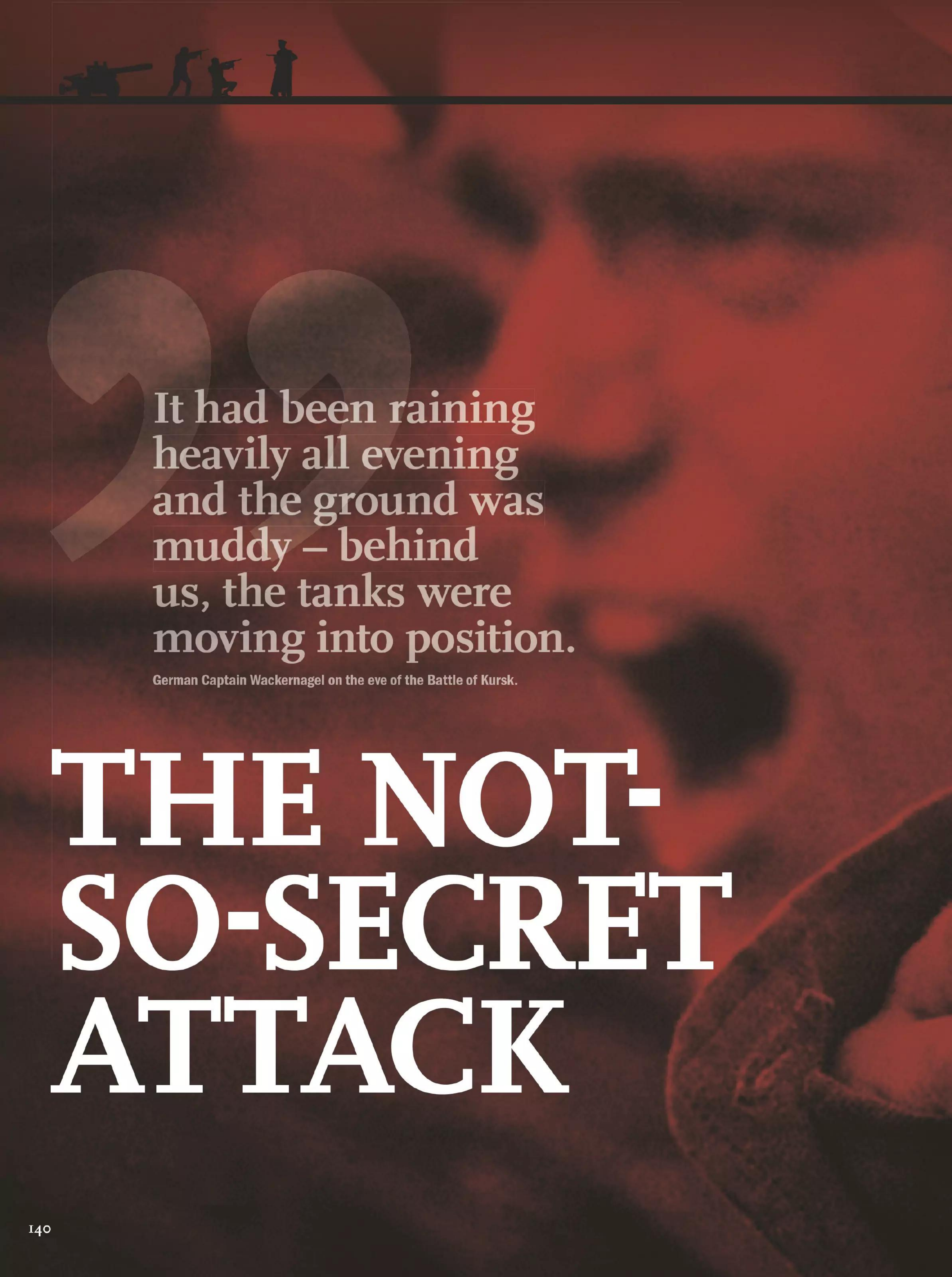
scheduled to begin around 03.00 on 5th July. Zhukov was in the company of General Konstantin Rokossovsky when he received the information. At the meeting, Rokossovsky asked Zhukov if he thought they should inform the General Staff or immediately prepare the artillery for a pre-emptive attack. Zhukov replied firmly:

"We won't waste time. Give the order as stipulated in the plan of the Front and the Stavka, and I'll ring Stalin right away."

Stalin agreed with the decision. The Red Army must forestall the Germans with a massive bombardment. Zhukov and Rokossovsky then drove to the headquarters nearest the front, where there was a flurry of activity. Telephones rang constantly as final preparations were made. And then at 02.20 on 5th July 1943, the final attack order came. Zhukov called it a symphony from hell. He was right. ■

The Tiger tank reached the battlefield in 1943. It was the Germans' great hope but was so difficult to maintain that it proved unsuitable for fighting on the Eastern Front.





It had been raining heavily all evening and the ground was muddy – behind us, the tanks were moving into position.

German Captain Wackernagel on the eve of the Battle of Kursk.

THE NOT-SO-SECRET ATTACK

Kursk front line, July 1943



A final prayer. Despite Communism's ban on religion, the Red Army allowed soldiers to pray to God before the decisive battle.

The not-so-secret attack

In the summer of 1943, almost 800,000 German soldiers, supported by 3,000 tanks, were ready to attack the Soviet positions at Kursk. The assault was prepared in secrecy – or so the Germans believed. But the Soviets knew all about the plans, and before long, the world’s biggest armoured battle would begin.

By Benjamin Christensen

On 4th July, under heavy artillery fire, German Lieutenant Geiger and his unit from the 394th Panzergrenadier Regiment advanced towards Soviet outposts near the town of Gertsovka. The Germans were right on the front line at Kursk and had been tasked with driving the Soviets from their forward positions before the German Army began its long-awaited summer offensive the following day with a well-prepared pincer manoeuvre at the Kursk salient.

“I scoured the terrain through my binoculars. I will never forget what happened next. I was suddenly hit by something powerful that sent me flying. I was still holding the binoculars in front of me but was now looking in a completely different direction. My first reaction was bewilderment as to how I was seeing a different section of terrain. But the next moment, I felt a sharp pain in my right hip, as if I had been pierced with a sword. When I touched the area, blood poured out. I had been hit by a large projectile that had passed right through my body.

“The enemy artillery fire started again. I shouted to the sergeant major that I was wounded and that he should take over the platoon. Then I rolled down into a crater to take cover from the enemy fire. Our company continued the attack, and no one seemed to notice that I was wounded,” said Geiger, who did not yet know that his unit was engaged in a battle

that would become known as the world’s greatest armoured assault: the Battle of Kursk.

Geiger had no time to think about the impending battle. Badly wounded, he tried to stay alive while his comrades put the Soviets on the defensive.

“Suddenly I was all alone, and an eerie silence surrounded me. I heard the noise of battle in the distance. I felt my wound again and saw that my trousers and jacket were completely soaked with blood. I began to shake. Desperate thoughts hit me. I could barely move – who would find me here? I resigned myself to my fate. Then, from out of nowhere, a head poked up over the crater’s edge and a hand reached down to pull me out. I could see that a motorcycle with a sidecar had stopped. I felt my unknown companion put me in the sidecar and speed away. Then I passed out.”

Difficult odds awaited

Lieutenant Geiger was one of the first German soldiers to be wounded in the Battle of Kursk, which officially began the following day, 5th July 1943.

Months of preparation had gone into the operation and the German generals’ plan was simple. The 9th Army of Army Group Centre would advance towards Kursk from the north, while the 4th Panzer Army of Army Group South would advance from the south. Their task was to break through the many layers of Soviet defences and reach the city of Kursk, thus driving a 200-kilometre-deep wedge behind the Soviet units on the front line, cutting them off from escape. The hope was to capture hundreds of thousands of Soviets and weaken the Red Army, just as the Germans had managed before in 1941 and 1942.

But this time the Soviets were ready and the Germans outnumbered. In the south, Army Group South, with its 450,000 men and 1,500 tanks, faced 626,000 Soviet soldiers and 1,700 tanks from the Red Army’s Voronezh Front. The situation was even worse in the north, where Army Group Centre’s 332,000 troops and 1,000 tanks faced the Soviet Central Front’s 712,000 infantry and 1,800 tanks. The Soviet positions were also well equipped. The Red Army knew that its anti-tank guns had difficulty penetrating the armour on ►

Soviet pilots attack German airfields on the day of the attack – a tactic the Germans had used during every previous offensive.



Heavy bombardment took Germans by surprise

Early in the morning of 5th July, the Red Army's guns began a devastating bombardment of German soldiers and tanks as they prepared to attack. The assault caught the Germans unawares.

The Soviets had such accurate intelligence that, a few hours before the planned German offensive, they launched a huge bombardment of the German Army. Thousands of guns hammered away along the front line where the Germans were preparing units for the attack.

On the northern front alone, 3,000 guns, mortars and rocket launchers were fired. Over the next three hours, half the total ammunition used during the entire Battle of Kursk would be expended. Although the pre-emptive bombardment was alarming and inflicted

heavy losses on the Germans, the effect was not quite as hoped, as the commander of the Soviet forces, Marshal Zhukov, noted:

"Naturally, the artillery counter-preparation did inflict heavy losses on the enemy and disorganised the troop control in the course of the offensive but, all the same, we had expected that its impact would be greater. When observing the course of the fighting and questioning prisoners, I came to the conclusion that the Central and Voronezh Fronts had started the counter-preparation too early. The German soldiers were still asleep in the

trenches, dug-outs and ravines, and the tank units were still under cover in the waiting areas. It would have been better to have begun the counter-preparation approximately 30-40 minutes later."

Despite Zhukov's words, the bombardment was highly damaging. On the northern front alone, Soviet guns destroyed 50 German gun batteries, greatly weakening the initial German assault that was supposed to wipe out bunkers, gun emplacements and minefields. Thus a crucial part of the German combat power was taken out of play.

Historians say the Soviets' pre-emptive strike on the day of the German offensive was the heaviest bombardment in history. The Red Army fired more shells in a few hours than the Germans used during the entire campaign against France.



the front of German tanks, so the Soviets had placed guns in hidden positions around the terrain. As the Germans drove past, the Soviets would open fire on the Nazi tanks' thinly armoured sides.

Germans captured Soviet trenches

The main attack on the Soviet lines at Kursk was scheduled for 02.00 on 5th July but the first German units, including Lieutenant Geiger's, began to move forward and attack Soviet outposts the previous afternoon. The infantry was tasked with clearing corridors and securing crossings for the German tanks that would attack the following day and break through the main Soviet lines. Another of the soldiers taking part in the early push was Captain Wackernagel, who described the situation after his unit had completed its mission and moved into position in captured Soviet trenches:

"It had been raining heavily all evening and the ground was muddy – behind us, the tanks were moving into position. We were being shelled by heavy Soviet artillery. It was that evening that the Führer's orders for Operation Citadel reached us. Hitler's message to our soldiers was to give everything they had in the battle

that lay ahead. I still remember what was happening when we received the message. I was lying in a trench, dirty and soaked to the skin. Our own artillery was firing intensely and the enemy was replying in kind.

"I ordered a staff officer to read the message aloud. The whole situation was not without a certain degree of comedy. The officer shouted as loud as he could to drown out the roar of our artillery, while enemy shells burst around us as we huddled together for safety. I am not sure if the soldiers heard anything that was read out, or if they even listened."

All along the front, German soldiers prepared for the next day's attack. Some calmed their nerves with a sip of schnapps or vodka. Others tried in vain to get some sleep, like Lieutenant Walter Schaefer-Kehnert:

"Drenched by a thunderstorm and freezing cold, we huddled together in our foxholes, barely



The German soldiers were already tired when the fighting began. Throughout the night, Soviet shells had robbed them of sleep and thinned out the ranks.

You can be sure that we will give them a thrashing. No one can match our will and fanaticism. ■ German Major Meinrad von Lauchert in a letter to his wife.

able to sleep because of the constant night attacks by bombers. Countless flares hung overhead, and the flashes of exploding bombs lit up the night."

With no hope of sleep, many soldiers instead tried to write a last letter home to their loved ones before the attack began.

"We are now five hours away from the start of the great advance," Major Meinrad von Lauchert wrote home to his wife, Erika.

"You can be sure we'll give them a thrashing. No one can match our will and fanaticism. We know what is expected of us. Don't worry – it will go well, as always. Morale is great!"

German optimism, however, was about to fade. The Red Army managed to capture several German soldiers during the fledgling attacks on 4th July and forced vital information out of the prisoners, as Soviet correspondent Vasily Grossman noted in his diary:

"A German sapper was captured during the night of 4th July. He revealed that the attack was beginning and that the order had gone out to clear mines."

The information from all the prisoners was identical: the Germans planned to start their attack between 01.00 and 02.00. The message reached Nikita Khrushchev, political adviser of the Voronezh Front.

The future leader of the Soviet Union called Moscow to obtain Stalin's permission to begin countermeasures. On the other end of the phone, the Soviet dictator asked Khrushchev what he recommended, and the latter replied: *"The commander [General Nikolai Vatutin] and I have been exchanging opinions, and we're very optimistic."*

Surprised, Stalin asked, *"Why?"*

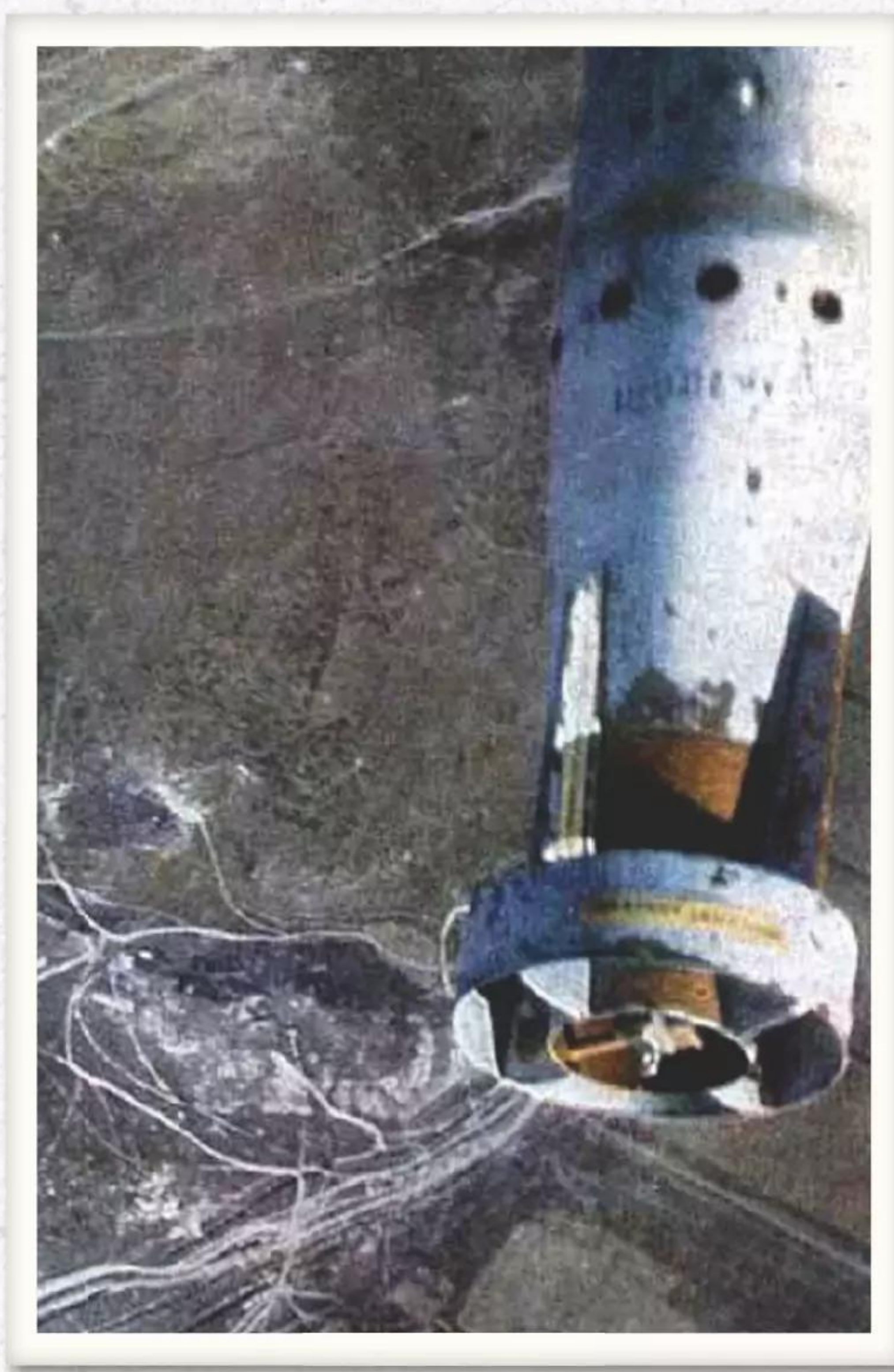
"Because our defensive positions are solid, and we'll make the enemy pay in blood when he tries to break through," Khrushchev explained.

The Soviets were ready. They had been preparing for months, building deep defensive lines with trenches, gun emplacements and thousands of minefields. A difficult task awaited the Germans if they wanted to break through the Soviet positions.

To pre-empt the Germans, Soviet Colonel General Rokossovsky ordered 500 guns, 460 mortars and 160 rocket launchers to begin bombarding the German forward positions at 01.20, just before the Nazis' own initial bombardment. The German forces were surprised to find themselves on the defensive, just hours before they were due to attack themselves. The 20th Panzer Division was one of the units being shelled. In its daily report, the commander noted:

"01.15: The start of a heavy enemy barrage from all types of heavy weapons. The Russians were anticipating an offensive from our side at 02.00. This is confirmed by the statements of two deserters in the 6th Infantry Division's sector."

After the war, Soviet historians were quick to claim that the bombardment did a great deal of damage,



The Luftwaffe soon regained the initiative. Train lines, headquarters and gun positions were bombed on the first day of the battle.

while the German units that suffered it reported only modest losses. The truth lay somewhere in between, because the thousands upon thousands of shells wore down the Germans before the battle even began.

Luftwaffe went on the attack

The bombardment of the German positions also came as a surprise to the Luftwaffe. One pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Lehweß-Litzmann, recalled:

"In the morning of 5th July, the troops assembling for battle were in for an unpleasant surprise: the Soviet forces initiated the attack with an unexpected time-on-target strike on the troops that were just forming for the attack. They called me excitedly – I had just gathered the commanders for a last briefing in my headquarters – and changed the orders. We had to take off at once in order to suppress Soviet artillery, even though it was still dark."

To support the German infantry and armoured columns, the Luftwaffe was ordered to keep the Soviet positions under constant pressure. In his diary, Stuka pilot Lieutenant Erhard Jähnert described the main tasks and tactics of the German dive-bombers on the first day of the Battle of Kursk:

"To neutralise the artillery fire of the Soviets, we were sent in waves against their positions. When we arrived at the assigned area, we relieved another formation. We then circled over the artillery position for up to 20 minutes, while ►



each aircraft plunged to attack, one by one. Thus maximum pressure was put on the Soviet gunners, who were constantly under air attack."

But the Luftwaffe did not dominate the air this time. The Soviet air force had started to receive new supplies of Il-2 fighter-bombers, which were almost the equal of the German planes. However, Soviet pilots were still being trained too quickly and most had no experience with the aircraft. For many of them, 5th July was their first combat mission. Hungarian pilot Miklós Keyneres, fighting on the German side, described the dogfights between German Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters and the new Soviet Il-2s:

"We spot four Russian fighter-bombers peacefully approaching in close formation, despite the deadly anti-aircraft fire. We fly over burning wreckage. I dive towards the Russian formation, ignoring the anti-aircraft fire. Then I see that I have made a miscalculation. Behind the four Russian planes, four more come flying. I dive between the two formations and fortune smiles on me again," Keyneres explained, then continued:

"The machine on the left side peels off from the rest, with me in hot pursuit. The hunt begins. The Russian pushes close to the ground and escapes, hopping over trees. But we remain clung to his tail. On my right-hand side, three Germans are pursuing too. One of the Germans dives on it, but fails to bring it down. Now my turn has come. I pull up slightly and, from the far side, I aim ahead of the engine but hold my fire for another moment. The distance is still too great. Then I squeeze both firing buttons ... I shoot at the cockpit. By now the Russian gunner does not return fire. From a close distance, I open up with the cannon. The machine shudders and hits the ground with its right wing tip. It slides along a creek, violently burning."

With the Luftwaffe's help, the Soviet gunfire died out after a few hours, and then it was the Germans' turn. The Wehrmacht's summer offensive was about to begin. The Red Army was to be put on the back foot and the panzer divisions rolled confidently across the steppes. At 05.00, German guns began a heavy bombardment of the Red Army's defensive lines, and the Luftwaffe simultaneously concentrated its attacks on command posts, routes and strategically important military positions.

An unnamed Soviet officer at the headquarters of the Voronezh Front, covering the southern half of

The Soviet lines of defence worked as planned, and the Germans soon discovered that their attacks were costing them dearly.

We experienced a wave of gunfire, constant bombardment, constant shooting, constant explosions. ■ Soviet tank commander Pavel Eremin on the Germans' initial attack.

the Kursk battlefield, experienced the initial bombardment at close quarters:

"The working over of our defences from the air, in combination with artillery fire, was supposed to secure a breakthrough for their German tanks by means of the suppression of our fire systems, the destruction of a significant portion of our troop strength, and the demolition of the fortifications and weapons of our defences at the intended breakthrough sector. Just for this reason, the Germans conducted a systematic, uninterrupted aerial bombardment of the ground in and around the breakthrough sectors by large numbers of aeroplanes, with the use of large incendiary bombs, small fragmentation bombs and small cluster bombs.

"However, the extensive system of trenches and shelters in our defence prevented the enemy from realising his optimistic expectations regarding the effect [of the bombing]; our losses in men from the [enemy] aviation were insignificant."

Although the casualty numbers may have been negligible, the air raids and bombardments were far from pleasant for those soldiers in the line of fire. Pavel Eremin of the Soviet 6th Tank Corps recalled:

"We experienced wave after wave of continuous gunfire, bombardment, shooting, and explosions. The sound was so intense it deafened you. It was extremely difficult to tell what was happening. We were all afraid of dying. We had to overcome that fear."

Rookies manned the trenches

The bombardment was a heavy blow to the Soviet soldiers on the front line, many of whom were experiencing their first combat. One of them was Private Nikolai Ivanovich Slavin of the 196th Guards Rifle Regiment, who found himself in some of the toughest fighting on the southern front.

"The fighting on 5th July was my first battle. For about an hour and a half, we were under constant fire from enemy guns and mortars, followed by aerial bombardment. I lay at the bottom of the trench and – as they say – waited for death. The noise was ear-splitting, so I couldn't think clearly.

"After the bombardment, the company commander ordered us to fire at the enemy infantry and showed us which direction to shoot in. There was a big cloud of dust and tanks and armoured vehicles coming towards us. Our guns were firing at them. 'Why are you just standing there?' the officer asked me. 'The tanks are a long way off,' I replied. I didn't have a clear target. The commander swore at me and told me to shoot anyway. I started shooting, like my comrades."

From his position, Slavin had to watch his shots miss while the German tanks continued their

approach: *"When the tanks were within 400 metres of us and started firing, a soldier next to me dropped dead. A shell had torn off half his head. Someone sent for the doctor. I was in shock. I could already clearly see the German infantry. Our guns started firing, but the Germans continued, walking behind their tanks, using them as cover. I kept shooting at them non-stop. A shell hit our trench and covered us with earth. I could see our whole platoon firing carbines."*

From both sides, artillery and mortar shells hammered down on the soldiers, throwing clouds of earth and human remains into the air. German bombers also began to attack Slavin's trench again.

"It felt like every plane was flying straight at me," remembered Slavin, who pressed himself against the bottom of the trench for cover.

"When I got back up and looked around, I realised that German tanks had broken through our trench. A tank was in flames."

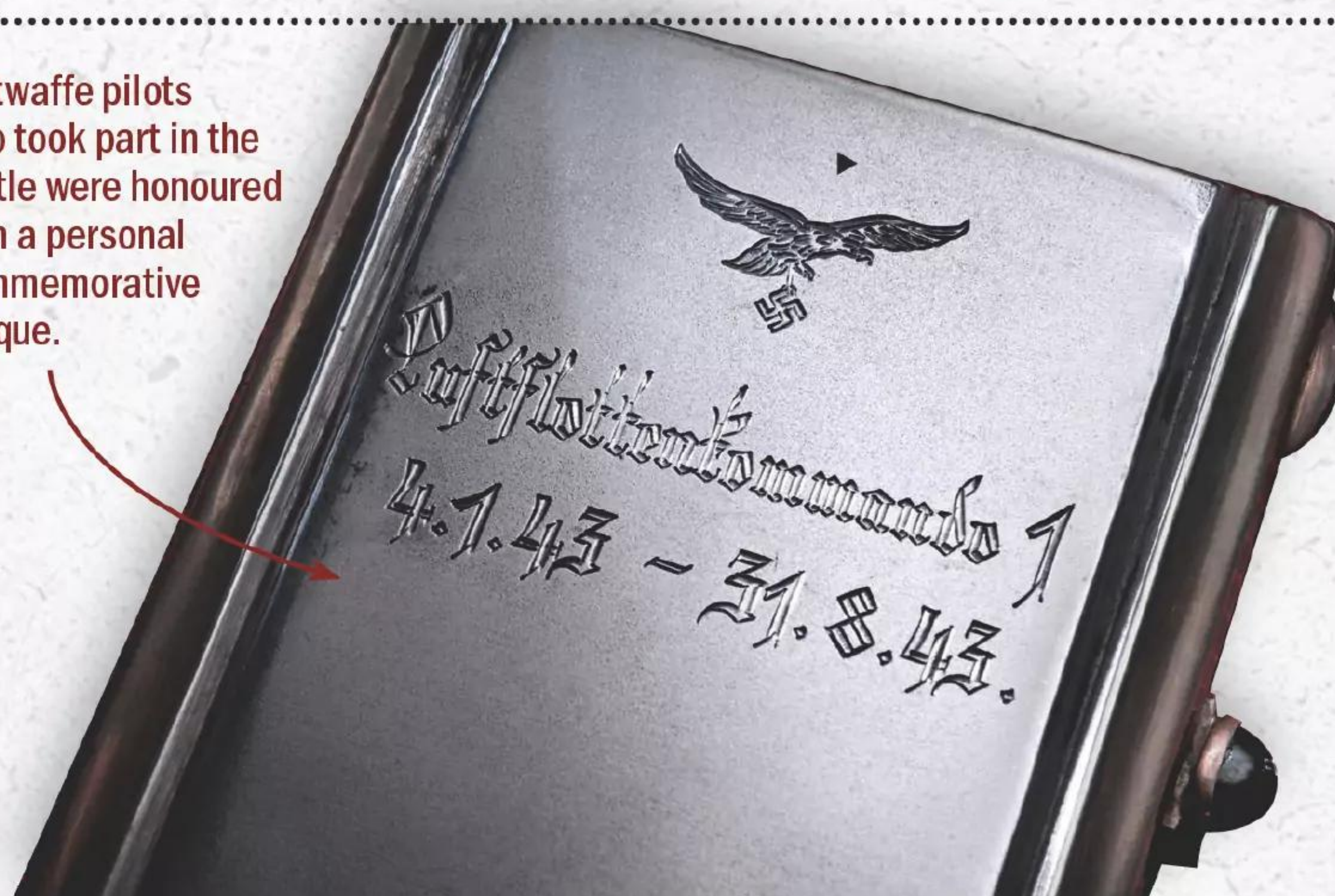
Not far from Private Slavin, German units fought their way through the town of Cherkasskoye. One of the soldiers was Captain Wackernagel, whose infantry unit had to navigate through the mayhem. The regiment's commander had been killed at the beginning of the attack, and Wackernagel had taken over his post amid the chaotic combat:

"I remember the hopeless chaos of the fighting inside the town. Companies and units were mixed up. Combat was close range, and shots were often fired only because those either side of you were firing. There's a huge danger of shooting your own men that way," recalled the captain.

Wackernagel somehow had to get his units under control in this chaos and order them to continue the attack on the Soviet positions.

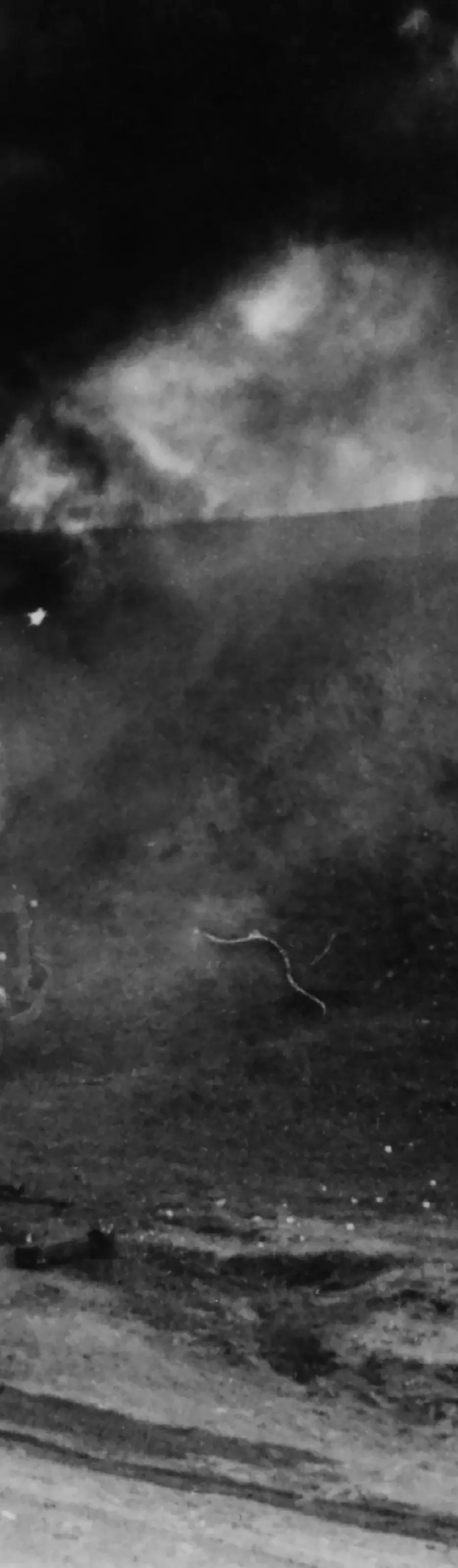
"I remember how a young lieutenant, who had been put in command of a whole company and had been through a bombardment that killed ▶

Luftwaffe pilots who took part in the battle were honoured with a personal commemorative plaque.



The German tank commanders *were still better than their opponents. When fighting raged on the steppes, the Germans destroyed six Soviet tanks for every one they lost.*





several soldiers right next to him, stood there, completely out of it, his eyes glazed over, unable to do anything. But he had to lead one of my companies. So I shouted at him to get him going and finally, with gun drawn, had to force him to resume the attack with his company.”

The casualty figures also began to rise for Private Slavin and his unit, still in close combat with German panzer troops.

“Our platoon leader came by several times yelling, ‘Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!’ About five or six German tanks approached. Our guns were firing at them, but they continued towards us. I saw a lot of dead soldiers. The orderlies dragged them away. I wanted to hide somewhere from this awful shooting,” he remembered.

“The commander came over and asked us to prepare grenades. Suddenly one of the German tanks broke through our trench, just five metres from me. The commander threw his anti-tank grenade and I heard the explosion. Two German soldiers in black uniforms got out of the tank and were immediately shot down by our rifles.”

While the Germans – despite resistance – were advancing in the south, the attack in the north had also begun. There, General Model’s 9th Army faced a major challenge. While the landscape in the south was shaped by wide open spaces over which tanks could easily attack, the front in the north was broken up by impenetrable forests. Only a stretch of about 90 kilometres was suitable for an armoured assault. The landscape meant that the Soviets had been able to concentrate their defensive positions in a narrow area and prepare extensive minefields and tank traps.

Fortunately for the Germans, a Soviet prisoner of war had provided information about a weak point in the Soviet line, against which they immediately sent their armoured forces.

“A wall of tanks came towards us. About five or six hundred. An awful lot of tanks,” recalled a Soviet soldier on the northern front.

“And then all hell broke loose.”

The defenders were outnumbered and had to fight fiercely to hold out until reinforcements could arrive and stop the German advance, which was growing in strength.

“The earth and the sky burned. Tanks lay on top of tanks. Soldiers on top of soldiers. It was like Judgment Day. But we kept our word to Stalin: not to give in, not one step back,” described another Soviet soldier.

Because they had been preparing for months, the Soviets were able to send reinforcements quickly to fill the gaps in the lines and respond aggressively.

Swarms of armoured troops were sent against the German spearhead. A small group of the new German Tiger tanks suddenly faced more than 90 Soviet ►►

FACTS

Cherkasskoye,

which Captain Wackernagel battled through, was one of hundreds of small settlements in the countryside near Kursk.

The ‘towns’ often consisted of just a few well-fortified houses.

SOVIET GENERALS



Stalin's four aces led the fighting



MARSHAL GEORGY ZHUKOV

Zhukov was the coordinator of the Soviet high command, Stavka, during the Battle of Kursk. It was his idea to reinforce the exposed front and build a strong defensive line against which the German panzer forces would wear themselves down. The experienced marshal, considered by many to be one of the greatest military geniuses of the 20th century, was convinced the Soviets could ruin Germany's chances of launching an offensive in the East again if they defeated the Germans at Kursk.



GENERAL KONSTANTIN ROKOSSOVSKY

As head of the Soviet Central Front, Rokossovsky was tasked with stopping German attacks in the north. The general had distinguished himself in battle over the past few years and was one of the Soviet Union's best commanders – especially of armoured troops. Rokossovsky was one of the few Red Army generals to have survived years in one of the NKVD secret police prisons during the purge of the Soviet officer corps in the 1930s. By the start of the war, he was back in Stalin's favour.



GENERAL NIKOLAI VATUTIN

The Voronezh Front was led by the highly capable General Nikolai Vatutin, one of Stalin's favourites. The young general had worked his way up from his childhood in a peasant family and was therefore not only a skilled military leader, but also a perfect example of the new social order in the Communist Soviet Union.



GENERAL IVAN KONEV

In the area behind Kursk, Stavka had assembled the largest army of reserves ever gathered before any campaign: the Steppe Front. To lead the reserves, which would be deployed when the German attack stalled and the time was ripe for a major counter-attack, Zhukov chose Ivan Konev. The general had shown great ability in the early years of the war and would end up commanding all Soviet land forces after the war.



Nazi generals were full of doubt



GENERAL OBERST HERMANN HOTH

Hoth led the German 4th Panzer Army, which was to attack the Soviet southern front during the offensive. Hoth was a skilled general – in fact, the most experienced panzer leader in the German army – but by the summer of 1943 he was burning out. Moreover, Hoth doubted the success of the attack on Kursk and hesitated at crucial junctures.



FIELD MARSHAL GÜNTHER VON KLUGE

As commander of the German Army Group Central, von Kluge was in charge of the northern part of the German attack on Kursk. But von Kluge left the main responsibility for his front's attack to Major General Walter Model, whose 9th Army spearheaded the northern assault. Von Kluge was one of many German generals who were sceptical about the attack plans against Kursk.

MAJOR GENERAL WALTER MODEL

As commander of the 9th Army, Model had the main responsibility for carrying out the German attack in the north. He was one of Hitler's favourites, but preferred defensive battles. Model long argued that instead of going on the offensive, the Germans should force the Soviets to attack. But to no avail.



GENERAL FIELD MARSHAL ERICH VON MANSTEIN

Manstein was commander of the German Army Group South and therefore in charge of the entire southern wing in the attack on Kursk. He was a skilled military strategist and was behind the strategy that had secured victory over France in 1940. Manstein was also the man behind major German victories on the Eastern Front, including in the Crimea in 1941-42 and again in the spring of 1943, when he led an attack that captured the important city of Kharkov.



The earth and the sky burned. Tanks lay on top of tanks. Soldiers on top of soldiers. ■ An unknown Soviet soldier described the fighting on 5th July.

T-34 tanks, and the battle became a bloodbath. Over 40 Soviet T-34s were shot to pieces, while the Germans lost seven or eight Tigers. Despite the losses, the Soviets managed to slow the attack in the north and the Germans, suffering heavy losses, only advanced eight to ten kilometres on the first day.

Germans faced stiff resistance

The German troops that attacked in the south also faced tougher resistance than expected. Lieutenant Rodde, Adjutant of the 3rd Panzer Division, noted:

"Despite our artillery and Stuka attacks, the enemy was far from defeated. The Soviet soldiers

fought with great ferocity and didn't give an inch. As a comrade from the panzergrenadier regiment reported, every Soviet had to be dragged out from his foxhole by his ears."

More surprises awaited Rodde and his unit as, for the first time, the Germans encountered the results of the Soviets' months of preparation and the massive defensive lines that farmers, labourers and soldiers had created together. All along the front, the Germans came up against metre-deep anti-tank trenches, minefields and low fortified positions, perfect for firing at advancing tanks.

"We crossed the Berezovsky River north of the anti-tank ditch. I had never seen one like it before, although we had seen a number of remarkable things in battle when it came to Russian ingenuity in the design of defences. This anti-tank trench was new to us."

Another unpleasant surprise came in the form of hidden Soviet T-34 tanks:

"This was another measure hitherto unknown. These dug-in tanks were very dangerous. They were camouflaged extremely well – as usual with the Russians – and could only be reconnoitred once they opened fire. They usually fired at short range so as to have a maximum chance of hitting something."

"The next thing that surprised us was the abundance of minefields. The mines reduced our mobility and speed. Our engineers worked constantly to clear paths for the tanks. As usual, there were not enough men, so the tank crew had to help. Artillery and mortar fire were the next weapons used by the Russians. Our units were immediately fired upon when they were stopped by a minefield or an obstacle."

Soviet Lieutenant-General NK Popel described his countrymen's defence of a line near Berezov on the morning of 5th July, where Soviet anti-tank guns stood ready to engage the German assault columns:

"There is no need for binoculars. The German tanks are plainly visible without them. They are rolling forward in a wide ribbon, broken here and there by gaps. Their spearhead is striving to gobble up more and more ground. The left flank of the column crushed a dense grove of nut trees, and the leading vehicles ... came to a stop in open ground. Black shell bursts coil tight plaits of smoke around them. The barrels of the anti-tank guns were lying horizontally, just above ground level. The spurts of flame from their barrels barely avoid the bent ears of wheat."

Soon after, Popel's unit came under heavy fire from the Germans, who managed to hit the enemy despite its camouflage and defences.

"The regiment fires for less than an hour, and one-third of the guns have already been put out of

The radio commander
had ultimate
responsibility in the
tank. He had to ensure
that the rest of the
crew carried out orders
quickly and accurately.





TANK RADIO

Radio made the difference

German tank drivers were outnumbered and their machines often broke down but they had an invaluable advantage. All the tanks were in radio contact with each other, allowing the Germans to quickly change tactics during battle.

Although the German tanks were outnumbered at the Battle of Kursk, the tank commanders had a decisive advantage over their Soviet opponents. Every German tank was equipped with a modern radio, so the men could communicate with each other about the enemy's positions. In the midst of a large and confusing battle, where the crew had

very limited visibility through the tank periscope, the radio was a huge advantage for the Germans.

By the summer of 1943, the Soviets had begun to install radios in their own tanks – but only the lead vehicles, driven by platoon leaders, company commanders and upwards, had radios. The units therefore had to follow

their leaders' movements more or less slavishly or communicate by gestures and flags – not easy in the middle of a battle. And if a platoon's lead tank, the only one equipped with a radio, was knocked out during the fighting, the unit was suddenly unable to communicate with the rest of the company, battalion or regiment.

1: INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The radio could be set to communicate internally between tank crews. Amid the engine noise and the sound of explosions, the radio was a gift and the best way to make oneself understood. Soviet tank commanders, by comparison, had to communicate with the driver by tapping him on the shoulders with their feet.

2: TO THE REST OF THE UNIT

Another option sent messages from the commander out to the other tanks in his unit. This enabled him to give them orders or warn them of enemies. The Soviets had to communicate with other tanks using flags or hand signals.

3: TO HIGH COMMAND

The radio could also be used to communicate directly with the staff of, for example, the company, battalion or regiment. In this way, the Germans could quickly report back and receive new orders. The Soviets had to establish orders before the battle and then follow them without changes or coordination.



action. The gun crew members are dwindling in number. The losses are not so much from the tanks as from enemy air attack.

"German dive-bombers rule the skies. Now and then, they form into a closed ring formation, or shake out into a file. Then once again they are whirling in a round dance, releasing their bombs one after the other. And below them, columns of earth and flames are rising, and pieces of gun carriages and logs are sent flying. Just a bit ago, Major Kotenko, the commander of an artillery regiment, tried to slip through to the gun emplacements in his jeep. The smouldering frame of his vehicle is now in the field. It is unknown how the surviving major still managed to reach the guns and is now serving a gun as part of the crew."

The artillery observers had by now left their posts to help operate the

guns. The Soviets needed every last man in the close combat that ensued.

"Many battery and platoon commanders are also manning guns in place of gun layers and loaders who have been knocked out of action," Popel recalled.

"Smoke, dust, cinders... A torrent of anti-tank fire and metal is directed against a torrent of fire and metal, discharged by German tanks and German artillery. A roaring blaze and whistling shell fragments are inundating everyone around like a boundless sea. The bitterness of the fighting is unparalleled. After several hours, nothing remained of two of our destroyer anti-tank artillery regiments but, as they say, their unit number."

After the battle's first day of fighting, Popel's two regiments had a total of only 12 guns

Exhaustion is written on the faces of the German soldiers, who managed to advance only a few kilometres on the first day of the battle.



remaining out of the 44 with which they had started the day.

Soviet units dared not retreat

The official report of the Soviet 51st Guards Field Division, defending the area near Berezov on the southern front, recorded the losses soberly and precisely:

"The 9th Rifle Company did not abandon its positions, and in the initial stubborn fighting, the entire company was wiped out together with its equipment; remnants of the 7th and 8th Companies — 41 men — fell back under the enemy's onslaught to the main defensive line."

The situation was the same all along the front, with Soviet units fighting doggedly to the end rather than retreat. In many cases, it was because the soldiers were spurred on by a belief in their own abilities and ►

NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



The New York Times

Tuesday 6th July 1943

Soviet lines hold

Nazis strike in the Orel, Kursk, Belgorod areas — make slight gain. 3,000 of foe killed. 586 tanks, 203 planes lost by attackers as 101-day lull ends.

Germany opened a heavy offensive yesterday on a 160-mile front in the Orel, Kursk and Belgorod sector and lost 586 tanks, 203 planes and thousands of men in the first few hours of savage fighting, Russia announced today.

More than 3,000 Germans were killed in a single sector around Belgorod and many tanks were destroyed during the morning, the Russian midnight communiqué reported.

The 586 tanks the Russians claimed to have knocked out are the equivalent of two complete panzer divisions and exceed any previous performance by Russian anti-tank batteries in 24 hours, according to Reuter.

The German attack came after 101 days of a lull since the end of the blazing winter campaign.

Massed German tanks and infantry, driving under an umbrella of planes, hit the Red Army lines in the direction of Orel, Kursk and Belgorod, key points on the line between Kharkov and Moscow, according to the midnight bulletin and a special communiqué recorded from the Moscow radio.

Usual blitzkrieg tactics

Russia's special communiqué indicated that the enemy offensive had come suddenly, in once-familiar German lightning fashion, without extensive artillery preparation, and the German High Command had depended on sheer impact for success in the first phase.

They met an alert and powerful Russian Army, which repulsed all main attacks, and the Germans were able to penetrate the lines at only a few places and to a slight degree, it was asserted.

The day after the first attack, the German offensive was front-page news around the world.





Tanks and soldiers on the move on 6th July 1943 – after a day of fierce fighting, the Germans made a small breakthrough on the southern front. Now tanks, artillery and soldiers roll through the gap in the line.

their love for their country, but just as often it was out of fear of the reprisals that awaited if they retreated. Captain Tikhon Chernov of the 67th Guards Field Division preferred to fight than flee:

"I was in the trench with a few soldiers firing guns. We set fire to two German tanks. I was wounded in my right side and lost a lot of blood. One of the soldiers bandaged the wound, but blood kept seeping out. Neither I nor the men left our position. I was getting weaker and weaker. When the German infantry came close, I couldn't even fire a rifle. That's how I got caught."

Together with hundreds of other captured Soviet soldiers, Chernov was taken behind the German lines, but the same day he managed to escape and return to the Soviets, where he was immediately interrogated by Colonel Pashkov.

"I was hoping that Pashkov would send me back to my battalion, which was engaged in combat. He said he didn't believe me. That I couldn't have escaped from German captivity when I was wounded. I was sent to the hospital, and when I got out, I was told to meet with the political officers of the Voronezh Front."

"They threw me out of the Communist Party on the spot and sent my papers to a tribunal 'for not resisting and being taken prisoner'. The tribunal sentenced me to ten years in a labour camp when the war was over, I was relieved of my captaincy and transferred to a penal unit."

Chernov survived the war and ten years of toil in Siberia, but fear of meeting a similar fate was great among the Soviets, who thus fought fiercely to the end.

On the first day of the Battle of Kursk, Soviet defences and the soldiers' patriotism were ultimately not enough. After 17 hours of fighting, the German II SS Panzer Corps finally broke through the first Soviet defensive line on the southern front. In response,

Soviet General Vatutin sent his 1st Tank Army in for a counter-attack. German Lieutenant Schöne, leading a tank company near the town of Cherkasskoye, encountered the Soviet assault:

"As we drove north-east of Cherkasskoye, we met the first heavy exchange of shots. I saw the commander's cupola on the tank next to me get shot off, and the commander's head went with it."

Soon Cherkasskoye was the centre of a fierce tank battle with heavy casualties on both sides.

"The German tanks began to retreat," recalled Lieutenant Ivan Tarasovich Tarasyuk, who was in a Soviet tank.

"Our regiment was ordered to make a counter-attack. Our tanks fought bravely and relentlessly. They destroyed 35 enemy tanks, but the regiment lost almost everything."

Ivan Tarasyuk had encountered the new German Panther and Tiger tanks, a nasty surprise for the Soviet tank commanders. A Red Army officer remembered his despair:

"It's hard to fight them. You shoot at them, but the shells bounce off. What's the result? Heavy losses! About 60 percent of the brigade."

But the new tanks also caused problems and confusion among the Germans themselves, who



weren't yet accustomed to the new machines, as tank commander Lieutenant Schöne reported:

"Two Panther tanks from the Großdeutschland Division came driving out of the heavy rain towards us. Because our gunners and commanders did not recognise the silhouettes of the new tank type, one of the tanks immediately opened fire and destroyed both Panthers."

But what really stopped the German tanks on the first day of battle were the thousands upon thousands of Soviet anti-tank mines strewn across the landscape. As Soviet political commissar Mikhail Bronnikov noted:

"After the German tanks broke through the trench line, they hit mines and were destroyed by our artillery."

The Soviets slowed down the advance for several hours, but during the day the Germans managed to

penetrate the first of the Soviet defence lines, both in the north and in the south. In a few places, the German Army even penetrated the second line of defence, but it took much longer to fight its way through the Soviet minefields, while Soviet artillery rained down on the attack columns.

Over 70 percent of the German tank losses on the first day were due to Soviet mines, and half of the new Elefant heavy tank destroyers were also lost. Most because their caterpillar tracks were blown to pieces in the minefields.

In the south, SS panzer forces had cut a 16-by-21-kilometre hole in the Soviet lines, through which German tanks and soldiers were now pouring. Despite the difficult odds, it seemed Germany's plan was succeeding. The road to Kursk lay open unless the Soviets could do something in the coming days to halt the German advance. ■

The Luftwaffe lost 850 aircraft in the fighting – nearly a third of its total air fleet on the Eastern Front.



“If you didn’t get killed, you were lucky”

From the WWII Veterans History Project

Wolfgang Kloth served first as a private and later as an officer in the German tank divisions. During the fighting at Kursk, he saw the Soviet defensive forces in action on the northern front and witnessed first-hand the German panic when the Red Army launched its counter-offensive.

Herr Kloth, can you tell us how you joined the German panzer divisions?

I chose tanks. If you were a volunteer, instead of spending six months in the werke organisation [Nazi work service, in which all recruits were put to work], you spent only three months there. So, I went to the werke organisation from autumn 1941 to December, and I was in Jarocin, which is part of Poland today. I drove home for two weeks' vacation, then received my draft notice and I went to Mödling, a suburb of Vienna, where I had basic training with the Panzer I.

If you see a picture of it, it's laughable. It was a two-man tank but with no turret on it. But we had a good time driving these things around the countryside. It was playing around, you know. It was basic infantry training. You learned about the rifle and about the pistol and how to make your bed. All this garbage didn't make very much difference later on.

You became an officer. How did that happen?

I went from there to the Eastern Front, to Army Group Central. I was in a Panzer III. The German Army was looking for people who might make officers, so they asked me. And then they took me out of the front and moved me to a place called Wüandsdorf – that's a suburb of Berlin. It had a big



WOLFGANG KLOTH (1923-2022)

Wolfgang Kloth enlisted in the German Army in 1941 and chose to join the tank forces. Kloth took part in the Battle of Kursk as part of Germany's 2nd Panzer Division. When the war was over, he ended up in a Soviet prison camp until 1948. In 1951, Kloth emigrated to the United States. He died there at the age of 99.



tank school where all the people of the panzer forces underwent officers' training for three months. That was in 1942. In spring 1943, I went back to the front and that was the time of the Kursk offensive.

What was it like to go suddenly from training to real combat? ?

You went to the front – all the noise and everything. You were really kinda scared. You had been in a panzer but you'd never had any hard experience in a panzer. You had to get used to the tank functions as a crew. Everybody had a specific function. You had to learn what to do and not to do. It was an interesting learning experience. If you didn't get killed you were lucky.

Did you get training in all the different roles during your time at tank school?

I learned how to basically drive a tank but didn't drive the real thing. I learned the functions of the radio operator but I never had that position. I had only three positions in a tank: gunner, loader and commander. I had only two battle days as loader. Battle days were only counted when you were behind enemy lines in a tank. If you had enough battle days, you were either lucky or dead.

The tanks I served in were really, really different tanks. The Panzer III was more moveable. It moved faster. The horsepower-to-weight ratio was better in the Panzer III than in the Panzer IV. In addition, it was shorter, so there wasn't as much room as in the Panzer IV. The real shitty thing was the driver and radio man didn't have any openings. They had to come out through the turret. I liked the Panzer III but its guns were not long enough – you couldn't shoot far enough. So, I was glad the first time I got back out there in a Panzer IV. It was an improvement.

Your own tanks were one thing, those of the Soviets were another. What were the enemy tanks like compared to yours?

Very good! When they were starting out, they only had a short 76.2-mm gun. Then they came around with this thing that we called the T-34 with a long "wach boom". (We called the long Soviet gun the "wach boom" because you heard "wach boom" before the shot hit you.) That was a very dangerous tank. The only advantage we had was the Russians had no communication between



Kloth on his way to the front in 1942. Shortly after, the 19-year-old soldier was thrown into the war on the Eastern Front.

their tanks. Absolutely helpless. But they were very good at going places where we wouldn't dare go because their kilogram-per-square-inch track ratio was a heck of a lot better than ours. Their footprint was a lot faster. In addition, you learned that the Russians would always show up where no one thought they could go.

What was your view of the Red Army's infantry during the war after fighting them for three years, from 1942 to 1945?

The Soviet infantry was always doing what they were told. They were shot if they didn't do the right thing. Their form of discipline was very foreign to the American and German systems. A life was nothing. In the German Army, people were considered an asset. In the Russian Army, it didn't make any difference how many people died, or why they died.

They were an efficient army. They did a good job fighting. However, if they collapsed, they collapsed totally. But as long as they kept fighting, they were a very good force. In the end, they were a successful army, no question. And besides, there were lots of them! In Germany, they say: "Too many dogs are the death of even the smartest rabbit."

They had a very strange system in their relations between officers and men. In the German Army, if a lieutenant came and you were a soldier (an enlisted man), you had to do what the lieutenant said. In the Russian Army, if a lieutenant came and you as a soldier were not in that lieutenant's company, you didn't do what ►

he told you. So that led to very strange relations and they had problems with that.

How long were you in Kursk?

At Kursk, it was four days. And it wasn't much fun. The Germans faced, for the first time, huge numbers of T-34s dug in – up to the turret. And that's a bad deal – very bad. Number one, they are hard to see. Number two, they are hard to hit. And number three, they had already predetermined the distances to targets: "You know that they have to come through there, over that hill is 1,500 metres and over there is 1,200." They were way in the advantage, way in the advantage. That was a sad affair. We really took a beating.

We were in the northern section of the bulge. Right after we had a little bit of success, they broke through way to the north of us. We had a three-day road trip in retreat. It's murder. You're glad to stop after only a couple of miles. Imagine! We were driving day and night. I was surprised they got us the gasoline. We killed quite a few of our own. It's terrible because in a retreat a lot of

people died from friendly fire because you didn't know where they were. You were shooting at the Russians coming at us; after the Russians disappeared, all of a sudden came the next wave. We didn't realise they weren't Russians – they were Germans. A lot of people got killed that way. Then I got wounded and was out of it.

At Kursk, the Soviets had dug positions with a great many anti-tank guns. What was that like?

If you're faced with AT [anti-tank] guns, it's always a question of who sees whom first and who shoots first. In many cases, the intelligence of the commanding officer of the vehicle, to describe where the target is because the gunner can't see the target, made the difference. As the commander, you have to get the gunner to see what you want him to shoot at. You didn't pay any attention to artillery because, unless you got hit

Kloth was wounded four times, but does not consider himself a hero. Instead, he refers to himself as a lucky survivor.

Wolfgang Kloth



In the German Army, people were considered an asset. In the Russian Army, it didn't make any difference how many people died.

directly, it exploded someplace – it made some noise outside but you didn't pay any attention to that. Same thing with mortars. You're inside your tank and your hatch is shut. A mortar wouldn't hurt a tank.

What do you remember most about the fighting and the war?

Well, the bad thing is that the bad parts of your memory stay and the good experiences are forgotten. We had some very bad experiences where sometimes we didn't think fast enough and it cost a lot of lives. The Russians were masters at digging trenches and making foxholes.

The Germans said: "You had to have a mound in front where you can lay your rifle on it." From a hundred yards away, you could see where it was!

The Russians: you saw just a little dark spot and when you got there, there was a hole and the Russian could stand in it! In many cases, like during rain, you didn't see the hole. That surprised us, especially in the later years when the Russians used anti-tank rifles. They were very high quality. And a very high penetration. There are a lot of places on a tank that an anti-tank rifle could shoot right through.

They fought a different war. They had a large sack, like a large grocery sack on their back, and a bottle of water and five potatoes, and they lived on that for five days. The Germans would get all upset if they didn't get any food. And the Americans would get more upset if they didn't get any food.

An army can be described as a triangle where the top is the fighting soldier and the bottom is the people who support that soldier at the front. While the Germans were like an equilateral triangle, the Russians were a very thin, steep triangle. Very few people were needed to keep a Russian soldier alive and fighting.

You've said that skill meant nothing, but luck was the deciding factor for everyone...

The best things you can have are dumb luck and dry martinis! You ask: why didn't that happen to me? Why am I here and not under the ground? Sometimes luck is so obvious! Once I took a long-range shot – I don't know where it came from or what it was. I was in a Panzer IV and



With the annexation of Austria in 1938, the 2nd Panzer Division was moved to the mountains and given the Austrian double-headed eagle as its emblem. The photo is Wolfgang Kloth's own of his tank on the Eastern Front.

a solid shot dropped down between the driver's hatch and the radio man's hatch. It killed the driver. It killed the radio man. But we got out. That was it.

I became a prisoner of war in Russia in 1945. The Russians divided the labour force into four categories. One would be the very muscular ones. A different workload would be assigned to each category. So if you were in category one and he was in category two, you would have to shovel more sand than he did.

To determine your category, you paraded naked in front of them and they pinched you in the ass. They checked how big your gluteus maximus was. I was born with almost none. I was in very good physical condition but I don't have a butt! So, I was always category three, which put me way ahead of everyone else when it came to workload. You talk about dumb luck, that's dumb luck.

Can you talk about the circumstances of your capture?

I wasn't captured. I surrendered. The war was over. We lined our guns up and the Russians came. We threw our weapons away and marched – became prisoners. You know, this is a very unpleasant thing. All the time you were so concerned to just stay alive. You can't even imagine that. From one day to the next. You knew that the country was defeated and that no one gave a damn about you. For two years, my parents didn't even know if I was alive. So, it's a very strange circumstance. The Russians weren't really a friendly people. ■



DEATH MATCH ON THE PLAIN

The battle lasted until the last ammunition was used. We wiped out the last tank as it reached exactly 30 yards from our position.

German Corporal Kurt Sametreiter manning an anti-tank position on the northern front.

Prokhorovka, 12th July 1943



The German soldiers were battle-weary and had suffered heavy casualties as the Wehrmacht brought its remaining forces to a decisive battle near the village of Prokhorovka.

Death match on the plain

On 12th July, German panzer corps attempted to advance to the village of Prokhorovka in a last attempt to close the Kursk pocket. There, three German and five Soviet armoured divisions came together with immense force in a chaotic struggle to win the battle. By the end of the day, the Battle of Kursk was decided.

By Benjamin Christensen

On the morning of 12th July, Obersturmführer Rudolf von Ribbentrop and his unit stood not far from the village of Prokhorovka on the southern front of the Battle of Kursk. The evening before, the young officer had been told to prepare his company of tanks for a major attack by Soviet armoured units. Now von Ribbentrop waited in suspense.

"The infantry had made some observation which made them think they might have to fight tanks. I did not envy them. From our perspective as tankers, a Russian T-34 looked rather different than it did to an infantry soldier in his foxhole," the son of German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop recalled as he stood ready to defend his homeland at the front.

On that day, the Germans would require all able-bodied men – and tanks.

Von Ribbentrop sipped his malt coffee substitute in the turret of his tank as he scanned the horizon, where enemy movements could be traced using smoke signals from units along the front line.

"In front of us on the hill there rose a purple smokescreen. It was sent up by the flare cartridges, the signal designated for that day as a tank warning. The considerable number of such purple smoke clusters rising into the air indicated that evidently a major tank attack by the Russians was underway."

Hundreds of Soviet tanks were pounding von Ribbentrop and the German units. The Red Army had launched its counterstrike south of Kursk. Earlier in July, the Soviets had watched the German panzer units laboriously work their way through the well-prepared defensive lines around Kursk, but they'd not done so idly. Red Army generals had simultaneously

plotted a major counter-attack using their huge reserves – designated the Steppe Front. Now it and all available tanks were to be deployed.

In the days before the attack, Soviet troops along the front had been ordered to brace themselves and wait for reinforcements. Infantry officer Georgi Gubkin stressed the importance of digging in:

"The Soldier's 13th Commandment. It is better to dig 10 metres of trenches than a three-metre grave."

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of fresh soldiers had transferred to the front, accompanied by hundreds of tanks. Summer had set in over Kursk, and Boris Nazarov, part of the crew of a self-propelled gun, recalled the hardships the reinforcements endured even before they reached the front:

"We drove all night and the following day. Despite the fact that the hatches were open, the heat inside the vehicle was unbelievable. [Commander] Ivanych barred us from sticking our heads out of them, so we were sitting inside stripped almost naked."

The march to the front was so gruelling that Soviet units were reporting casualties before they'd reached the front. Soldiers collapsed from heat stroke and exhaustion, while vehicles ground to a halt as their engines were destroyed by the huge clouds of dust whirled up by the columns. A Soviet general noted that *"such a difficult march could not help but tell on the state of the corps' material"*, and the number of combat and transport vehicles that broke down steadily grew. The difficult terrain, bridges with poor load-bearing capacity, the absence of good fording sites – all contributed to the number of accidents and breakdowns. One tank brigade found on reaching the front that 12 T-34 and seven light tanks had failed to arrive because they'd *"fallen behind due to technical breakdowns"*.

But Stavka – the Soviet High Command – viewed the losses as acceptable; all that mattered was getting enough men to the front to slow the German advance and launch a counter-attack.

General Pavel Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army would lead the counter-offensive. The tank army was ordered to launch a major assault near the village of Prokhorovka, where the German II SS Panzer Corps was close to breaking through. Outside Prokhorovka, von Ribbentrop's 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler had taken up a defensive position



RUDOLF VON RIBBENTROP (1921-2019) was the son of German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who negotiated the 1939 non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and the agreement that divided Poland between the two countries. He fought against the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front as commander in the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler panzer division.



while waiting for another SS division, Totenkopf, to secure its flank and continue the offensive.

SS division secured important bridge

The 3rd SS Panzer Division Totenkopf started by attacking the Psel River west of Prokhorovka to secure a crossing, but by chance ran directly into Rotmistrov's 5th Guards, which was on its way to the front. The Soviets were caught by surprise and the commander of the 42nd Guards Field Division, Lieutenant General Aleksey Zhadov, summed up the situation:

"I have to admit that we had not anticipated that events at the front would develop so rapidly and that we would not be able to take up defensive positions in time... Also, in marching to the front, we did not form strong forward detachments. This led to a situation in which the divisions' main force had to deploy directly under enemy fire."

The Soviets' situation wasn't helped by the lack of ammunition across several units, because the support troops hadn't the resources to quickly deploy them during the rapid advance. The supply situation was even worse for the infantry units set to take part in the attack. The 6th Guards Airborne Division, for example, had

only 6,903 rifles and machine guns for the division's 8,916 soldiers. Some of the soldiers were also newly trained, such as Lieutenant Ilya Nikolayevich Kozlov, who arrived almost directly from the military academy:

"I finished the expedited four-month programme of the Suvorov Infantry School and became a lieutenant," he later recounted.

On the morning of 11th July, Kozlov was one of the soldiers facing the SS Division Totenkopf's attack:

"A division was fighting a defensive battle in front of us. All of a sudden, we received an order from the battalion commander to switch ... to the offence against the German troops, which had broken through the division located in front of us. We moved forward a little bit, but then were attacked by tanks and infantry."

The untested Red Army soldiers would have to draw on the experience of those few officers who had actual combat experience.

"Captain Bugrov, the battalion commander, was a very experienced commander. He participated in the Stalingrad battle. He managed to turn our battalion around under cover of the gun company and mortars. My platoon was in the first echelon ►

The Germans deployed all reserves. Both older tanks and the last Tiger tanks were sent on to the battlefield in a desperate attempt to make a breakthrough.

German soldier admired his brave enemies

German Alfred Rubbel was part of the 1st Company of the German 503rd Heavy Panzer Battalion, which took part in the fighting on 12th July with its Tiger tanks. In a letter home, he described the Soviet soldiers his unit faced: their fighting spirit, officers and their skills as soldiers.

"The common Russian soldier fought relentlessly and bravely, he would rather be beaten to death in his post than run away. If, however, tendencies within the group triggered such a reaction everyone more or less panicked and took flight. The Russian soldier was by far better accustomed to bearing adversities than were our own men. [He] was a master of making use of the environment, camouflaging his positions and improvising.

"When fear took hold everyone appeared paralysed by it. Hardly anyone had the guts to take the initiative and do something. With us, that was different. It was mostly our battle-hardened sergeants on the lower command level who would take the initiative, maintain order and keep things under control. Generally, however, the Russian soldier fought doggedly and this was more evenly noticeable throughout now compared to the campaigns in 1941 and 1942. Leadership quality on the lower command level [compared to our NCOs] was not good.

"We experienced for the first time during Operation Citadel that tanks were led by tank commanders. Apparently, this was to remove a major deficiency within the Soviet armoured corps. Much that would be called the art of war, however, had not been mastered although it was second nature for any of our leaders on the lower command level. This included, for instance, moving forward in a coordinated formation during an attack.

"As a military force on the battlefield, we always felt we had the edge over the enemy. This was not due to any degree of arrogance, but was well founded in our daily observations in battle. We were simply better in terms of leadership in our units, skill in using our weapons and overall cooperation of forces. To me the decisive factor seemed to be that all leaders from the lowest level of tank commander up through the ranks had been trained to rely on their own judgment in making decisions in respect to the overall objective. That was our strength, not our soldiers' bravery, which the Russian soldier had no less to offer."



Alfred Rubbel received a medal for at least 25 tank kills during the Battle of Kursk and survived the war.

and we managed to dig in quickly. It was very timely because the German aviation arrived and started bombing us for an hour. After that German tanks and infantry started to show up."

The German attack ran straight into Kozlov's unit.

"Our task was to fire at the German infantry, cutting them from their tanks and making them lay prone so our mortars could shoot at them. We performed this task, but I lost six people who were killed and about ten to 12 people wounded. It was half of my platoon.

"About 12 German tanks broke into the area occupied by a company next to us... We never saw those tanks again. They were probably destroyed... Nevertheless the battalion commander withdrew us about one to 1.5 kilometres in the afternoon."

Terrain slowed Soviet advance

The Germans had managed to advance just enough to capture a bridgehead on the north bank of the Psel River, from which they could threaten the west side of Prokhorovka. Despite the fierce fighting, the skirmishes were only a prelude to the huge tank battle that would follow the next day. The Soviets were planning a massive counter-offensive with units from the 5th Guards Tank Army.

Hundreds of tanks would attack across a narrow front made even tighter by a deep ravine impassable to tanks. The terrain forced the Soviet tanks into a narrow column rather than their usual large, open formations. Until they had pushed past the ravine and reached open ground, the tanks were extremely vulnerable and caught in a murderous fire from three sides. The advance was a suicide mission, but there was no other way to penetrate the area.

Regimental Commander Hellmuth Becker of SS Division Totenkopf was with his panzer unit at the front when the Soviet reserves began their huge counter-attack on 12th July.

"I noticed clouds of dust on the horizon ... soon Russian tanks began to emerge from these dust

Our task was to fire at the German infantry, cutting them from their tanks. ■ Soviet Lieutenant Ilya Nikolayevich Kozlov on the role of his platoon.

clouds. *'The Russians have advanced their reserves,' I said to my chief of staff, and I understood ... we had lost the battle for Kursk.'*

One of the Nazis' great tank commanders, Michael Wittmann, and his platoon of Tiger tanks were not quite as despondent. On the morning of 12th July, his unit was rolling towards Prokhorovka when it received word over the radio from German reconnaissance units.

"Achtung! Strong force of enemy tanks approaching from ahead! Many tanks!"

Barely a minute later, the huge Soviet tank army appeared on the horizon. Wittmann whistled softly at the sight: *"There are at least 100 tanks, some T-70s but mostly T-34s!"* the experienced commander relayed to his crew. *"Engage from a stationary position. Range: 1,800 metres plus!"*

What followed was a demonstration of the renowned skill and communication of the German panzer commanders. In almost perfect synchronicity, all the Tiger tanks opened fire with their huge 88-mm guns to rain death on the Soviet tank columns.

One Soviet tank commander recalled how tanks were on fire everywhere. Huge explosions sent five-tonne gun turrets flying six metres through the air. Some explosions were so powerful that entire tanks were turned into piles of scrap metal.

But despite the shelling, the Red Army continued its relentless advance, and before long German and Soviet tanks were embroiled in close combat. The Germans' advantages lay in keeping their distance and a relative order to the battle. But in the confusion and chaos that ensued, communication and firepower no longer mattered. Now manoeuvrability and numbers were crucial, and here the Soviets had the

advantage. Suddenly, Wittmann's radio yelled a warning: *"Achtung! Enemy is behind you."*

Wittmann's driver immediately accelerated, and what would have been a killer strike from a Soviet tank just a few yards away whizzed past. Soon after, though, there was a huge bang as a burning Soviet tank slammed into Wittmann's Tiger at full speed.

"Back up!" ordered the commander, and once again the German tank crew managed to escape the raging firestorm. They were even able to help the crew of another Tiger tank who were forced to abandon their burning vehicle. The Prokhorovka plain was now a chaotic inferno.

Germans took the slope

To the west of Wittmann's unit, Rudolf von Ribbentrop and his unit of seven German Panzer IV tanks rolled over the ridge in front of them to take up position on the opposite slope.

"As we drove down the forward slope we spotted the first T-34s, which were apparently attempting to outflank us from the left. We halted on the slope and opened fire, hitting several of the enemy. A number of Russian tanks were left burning. For a good gunner, 800 metres was the ideal range."

"As we waited to see if further enemy tanks were going to appear, I looked all around, as was my habit. What I saw left me speechless. From beyond the shallow rise, about 150 to 200 metres in front of me, appeared 15, then 30, then 40 tanks. Finally, there were too many to count. The T-34s were rolling towards us at high speed, carrying mounted infantry."

"I had poked the gunner in the right side with my foot. This was the signal for him to traverse ►

Tank ace Michael Wittmann (centre) took part in the battle with his crew. Wittmann later fought in Normandy against Allied forces.



right. Soon the first shell was on its way and with the impact the T-34 began to burn. It was only 50 to 70 metres from us.

The German guns' ideal range of 800 metres was now negated by the fact the battle had turned into close-quarters combat, and it wasn't long before the Soviet and German tank formations were thoroughly mixed together in one chaotic jumble of shells, clouds of dust and tanks in various stages of distress: firing, burning, or frantically fleeing the enemy.

"At the same instant, the tank next to me took a direct hit," Ribbentrop recalled. "His neighbour was also hit, and soon it, too, was in flames. We had no time to take up defensive positions. All we could do was fire. From this range every shot was a hit, but when would a direct hit end it for us? Somewhere in my subconscious I realised that there was no chance of escape."

The men in von Ribbentrop's tank nevertheless continued to fire away in desperation.

"We knocked out a third, then a fourth T-34, from distances of less than 30 metres... Soon my loader shouted: 'No armour-piercing left!' Further ammunition had to be passed to the loader by the gunner, radio operator and driver. We turned in the midst of a mass of Russian tanks, rolled back about 50 metres and reached the back slope of the first rise. There we turned to face the enemy again, now in somewhat better cover.

"Just then a T-34 halted about 30 metres diagonally to our right. I saw the tank rock slightly on its suspension and traverse its turret in our direction. I was looking right down the muzzle of its gun. We were unable to fire immediately, as the gunner had just passed the loader a fresh round.

"Panzer forward, move!" I shouted into the microphone... We drove past the T-34 at a distance of about five metres. The Russian tried to turn his turret to follow us, but was unable to do so. We halted 10 metres behind the stationary T-34 and turned. My gunner scored a direct hit on the Russian's turret. The T-34 exploded, and its turret flew about three metres through the air, almost striking my tank's gun."

Despite their ongoing success, the danger was far from over. Ribbentrop and his group of tanks found themselves alone on the battlefield, surrounded by hundreds of enemies. Fortunately for them, the Soviets failed to notice the Germans in the confusion, instead continuing their attack forward and past von Ribbentrop's group. But the Germans knew it would only be a matter of time before the Soviets noticed them – especially as a large swastika flag fluttered on the outside of von Ribbentrop's tank.

"We had only one slim chance: we must remain constantly in motion. A stationary tank would be immediately recognised by the foe as an enemy

and fired upon, because all the Russian tanks were rolling at high speed across the terrain. We now faced the additional danger of being destroyed by one of our own tanks... On the smoke- and dust-shrouded battlefield, looking into the sun, it would be impossible for our crews to distinguish us from a Russian tank. I repeatedly broadcast our code-name: 'Kunibert here! We are in the midst of the Russian tanks! Don't fire at us!' I received no answer."

In the chaos and under the thick cover of smoke, von Ribbentrop's tank miraculously avoided being spotted by the Soviets or being subject to friendly fire.

"Suddenly, ahead of us I saw a dense mass of Russian infantry and called to the driver: 'Turn slightly to the left!' Seconds later he spotted them. Machine guns firing, we rolled through the mass of troops from behind, who did not realise that they were being overtaken by a German tank."

Soviets walked into trap at bridge

At a tank trench, which was only passable at one point via a bridge, the Germans managed to slow down the huge Soviet attack for the first time. Von Ribbentrop observed the chaos that ensued as the Red Army attempted to cross the narrow bridge.

"[Russian tanks] were storming toward the bridge from every direction. This made it easier for us and our battalion to find our targets. Burning T-34s drove into and over one another. It was a total inferno of fire and smoke... T-34s blazed, while the wounded tried to crawl away to the sides. Just then I heard my loader report... We had expended our entire supply of armour-piercing ammunition. Now all we had left on board were high-explosive shells, which were ineffective against the heavily-armoured T-34s.

"Initially I held my fire. Then I heard my gunner cry out. I heard him blurt out, 'My eye! My eye!' We had taken an unlucky hit on the turret precisely at the tiny opening for the gunner's sight. The shell had not penetrated all the way through, but far enough to drive the sight backward with terrific force. My gunner, who had been peering through the sight, suffered a serious head injury as a result."

Von Ribbentrop's guns and tank were left disabled, but before long he was able to switch to another tank and return to battle. By midday, the Germans had recaptured the hill where they'd started the day.

Von Ribbentrop and his tank crew destroyed a total of 14 Soviet tanks during the day, and the young officer was awarded the Knight's Cross for his efforts. While the Soviets were forced to abandon the attack across the bridge, it appeared the Red Army would get the breakthrough it had hoped for when, at around 09.15, an armoured column advanced along a ►

Soviet troops were rewarded with roubles for their heroism

Soviet soldiers were driven by more than fear of punishment to embark on suicidal missions. Stalin himself ordered a bonus system be put in place to ensure Communist heroes could secure lucrative bonuses.

In addition to their normal rations and pay, Soviet soldiers could earn extra money if they were skilled and fearless enough to, for example, single-handedly destroy an enemy

tank. The reward was 1,000 roubles, a princely sum and almost double the normal monthly wage of a factory worker. Over time, bonus schemes in the Red Army grew to cover acts of

personal heroism for everyone from infantry divisions to tank squads and even Air Force pilots, with incentives ranging from 500 to 2,000 roubles for select actions.

ANTI-TANK BONUSES

If you were a commander in an anti-tank unit, you received a 500-rouble bonus for each enemy armoured vehicle you destroyed. The rest of your crew had to settle for 200 roubles for their part in the deed. The same scheme applied to crews of Soviet tanks who destroyed a German tank.

INDIVIDUAL HEROISM

If you had the courage to climb on top of an enemy tank and destroy it with a well-placed grenade through a hatch or a Molotov cocktail in the exhaust, you would earn the biggest reward in the Red Army: 1,000 roubles. With it, you could buy, say, 2.5 kilograms of meat on the inflation-ridden Soviet black market.

BOMB THE ENEMY

There was money to be made in the Air Force, too. Long-range bombing missions far behind enemy lines triggered a cash bonus of 500 roubles for the entire crew of the few planes that survived the trip.

ATTACK BERLIN

The Soviet armed forces' largest bonus was reserved for those few pilots who served on long-range TB-7/Pe-8 and Yer-2 bombers, the only ones with the range to reach all the way to Berlin and bomb the enemy capital. The attacks were something of a suicide mission, and those pilots who miraculously survived the trip were rewarded with up to 2,000 roubles.

Fresh recruits in the Steppe Front were encouraged to fight with equal parts threats and rewards.



railway line, where German Corporal Kurt Sametreiter and his platoon lay in wait with five anti-tank guns. The Soviets launched their attack with a burst of rockets. Then the T-34 tanks came rolling at full speed, firing at Sametreiter's defensive position.

"We opened fire with our five guns," the platoon leader later recalled. "After about ten seconds, the first T-34 was ablaze and smoke shrouded the terrain. Sometimes we had to hold our fire because our own Panzergrenadiere leaped on to the T-34s and destroyed them with close-combat weapons. Then we opened fire again."

Despite this success, a group of Soviet tanks managed to cross the railway under fire to launch

an attack on Sametreiter and his men from the opposite flank.

"We had to turn the guns around. The battle lasted until the last ammunition was used up. We wiped out the last enemy tank when it was exactly 30 yards from our position. The Russian tank attack was repulsed. The number of attacking Russian tanks must have increased to about 120," Sametreiter noted, and the area around the German gun position bore witness to the heavy fighting, littered with burnt-out Soviet tanks.

Again and again, Soviet armoured units attacked, but their offensive was poorly coordinated. German officer cadet Günther Baer later recalled how his



08.30

Soviet officers issue the code words *"Stal! Stal! Stal!"* ("Steel! Steel! Steel"). The tank offensive is launched.

13.00

The battle rages on all fronts. The Soviets try desperately to capture the German positions on high ground – but without success.

21.00

The battle fizzles out into a draw. Both armies have suffered huge losses, but the Germans hold their positions.

platoon leader marvelled at the Red Army's poor use of its tank forces throughout the battle:

"If the Soviets would refrain from deploying this huge amount of tanks piecemeal, but instead in the framework of a coordinated attack, we would simply be blown away by their numerical superiority."

But the Soviets rarely managed to coordinate their tanks, as Baer observed for himself:

"Time and again we were perplexed at the haphazard manner of their attack... They always came in little spurts, 30 to 40 tanks at a time, once from the front, once from the left or from the right. One attack after another was shot to pieces – often in close combat, which saw the infantry destroying many tanks using magnetic charges."

"On the 12th we first warded off an attack of 30 to 40 tanks east of the railway. As usual, the enemy suffered heavily. However, throughout that day, particularly fierce engagements were fought

west of the railway where Tigers had been deployed. For this reason we were set to counter-attack to the west of the railway towards Mikhailovka as the day went on. We fought throughout the entire day, as the enemy was attacking from Prokhorovka, but also along the flanks, from the Yamki area on the right and the Mikhailovka area on the left. We held our positions on that day and did not retreat."

New aircraft types fought in the air

The Soviets were aware of their own shortcomings. In one report, an officer lamented the lack of cooperation and coordination:

"In the first two days of fighting, one notes a lack of operational interaction, reconnaissance and coordination among the corps. Basic shortcomings pointed out by the operational▶▶



Despite huge losses, the Soviets gain ground as the day progresses. Their numbers – men and tanks – are simply too overwhelming for the Germans.



Kursk 1943

SOVIET DEFENSIVE POSITIONS

German tanks were lured into death traps

The panzer divisions met more than just superior numbers in the form of Soviet T-34 tanks. Everywhere around Kursk, the battlefield was littered with the Red Army's ingenious defences of minefields, anti-tank ditches, trenches and strategic vantage points where the Soviet troops could lie in ambush. Therefore, even when the Germans had defeated the enemy tanks and thought they could finally speed up the advance, each attack extracted heavy casualties.

THE TRAP

With a carefully planned obstacle course of minefields, deep trenches and natural barriers such as lakes, the Red Army forced the Germans into their death traps – like a funnel. The ‘funnel’ narrowed in on a spot where the Soviets had a good view, making the German tanks particularly vulnerable.

AMBUSH

Hidden behind strategic ridges, Soviet tanks, soldiers and mobile artillery waited to strike back.



LOOKOUTS

In preparation for the attack, the Red Army had built a 175-kilometre-wide defensive wall consisting of six heavily fortified defensive lines including 5,000 km of new trenches. Protected underground, Soviet soldiers could easily move between positions. Lookouts kept an eye on the enemy and could radio to attack.

MINES

Over 503,000 anti-tank mines were laid in the grain and sunflower fields along the front at Kursk. The minefields led the enemy into the death trap.

MORTAR POSITION

From trenches, specially trained Soviet soldiers aimed 20,000 mortars and guns at the panzer divisions.

ANTI-TANK GUNS

On command, the first soldiers fired anti-tank shots from a good vantage point at the German tanks in the death trap. The attack acted as a starting signal for all other Soviet units to launch their hellish bombardment on the Germans.

FACTS

The Red Army sent a total of almost

700

tanks into the battle. The Germans had 294 vehicles still capable of fighting.

section of the army staff are the absence of artillery interaction with the 95th Guards Rifle Division. The units did not arrive on time at their jump-off positions. Regimental commanders did not understand their orders sufficiently. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Seletskii and Major Kakmovtsev were called to divisional headquarters at 08.00 in order to receive their instructions, when the battle had already begun.”

As chaos reigned across the plains, a battle also raged in the clouds above. Whoever controlled the airspace would have free rein to bomb enemy tanks and positions, and both the Luftwaffe and Red Army Air Forces refused to back down. In the air battle, two brand new types of aircraft took part in some of their first battles: the German Focke-Wulf 190 and the Soviet Yak-9 fighter. The aircraft were the two air forces’ new trump cards, but were so visually similar that the pilots involved often struggled to determine if they were facing friend or foe. This confusion almost cost German pilot Günther Rall his life:

“On 12th July I went up for a free chase with my adjutant late in the afternoon. The sun stood in the west, a humongous cumulus cloud rose up in the east, which was drenched in glowing red sunlight. We flew at an altitude of around 4,500 metres so that I did not notice what went on in terms of intense fighting on the ground that day.

“I then noticed two dots in the front of the glowing red cloud. We attacked immediately, the sun in our rear. Upon approaching I became unsure whether

these were really enemy planes or whether they could be two of the newly commissioned Fw-190 chase planes. I was aware that a squadron with that new type had been sent to the front for Citadel, but I had never seen this airplane before. So I pulled up just before the other airplanes ... and that is where I saw the red star on the wing.

“I immediately commenced the attack, and – coming from the side – I flew directly towards one of the enemy airplanes. Then occurred what is termed a ‘mid-air collision’. While my propeller cut off the enemy’s wing, his propeller slit my plane open from underneath. The enemy plane fell out of the sky, while I was able to retain lift.”

But Rall’s plane was too badly damaged to continue in the air much longer:

“The damaged propeller and the hull that was slit open were causing such severe vibrations, though, that I felt the engine would be torn out of the airplane any minute. But I managed to get behind my own lines where I made another crash landing.”

SS Division Adolf Hitler defended itself

Meanwhile, the Soviet XVIII Tank Corps along with the rest of the 5th Guards Tank Army continued to advance across the narrow front directly into the

Shelled German and Soviet tanks stand side by side on the battlefield, bearing witness to the intense close combat.

German defensive positions along the hills south of Prokhorovka and west of the railway. Here SS Division Adolf Hitler had taken up a perfect defensive position from which the elite corps could fire on the attackers from three sides, while German artillery observers enjoyed a clear view of the battlefield for calling in artillery and air support where necessary. In its report, the tank corps summed up the difficulties in defeating the position:

"Lacking necessary support from our fighter aviation and suffering heavy casualties from enemy artillery fire and bombing... The terrain in the corps' attack zone is cut by three deep ravines... which is why the 181st and 170th Tank Brigades, advancing in the first echelon, were forced to attack on the corps' left flank. The 170th Tank Brigade, attacking on the left flank, by 12.00 had lost 60% of its equipment. Despite these losses, overcoming the enemy's fire resistance, the corps units took the Oktyabrskii Sovkhoz."

The Germans couldn't help but admire the Red Army's determination to fight on despite its huge losses. Officer Cadet Kendziora, aboard a Tiger tank, noted the Soviets' willingness for sacrifice:

"I recall one example which I witnessed myself. One T-34 sat ablaze roughly a thousand feet from our positions. The crew had bailed out. I then noticed how an apparently wounded soldier dragged himself back to the burning tank, got in, and then drove the tank against one of ours. I think the latter was an armoured personnel carrier. The Soviet tank exploded upon impact. This is a prime example of the doggedness Soviet soldiers showed in combat. They obviously wanted to beat us right there on that battlefield. However, we held the ground against high numerical superiority, on this day and the following days."

Germans destroyed 416 tanks

Despite the huge losses on 12th July, the battles resumed the next day. Both Soviet and German units attacked and counter-attacked each other. German casualties on 12th July were high, with 122 tanks destroyed, but they paled next to the Soviets, who lost 416 tanks and thousands of soldiers. Wherever you looked, the battlefield remained shrouded in smoke from tanks still burning from the day before, and soldiers on both sides felt their stomachs turn as the stench of dead bodies rotting in the summer heat crept across the battlefield.

But during the fighting on 13th July, there were still some dribs and drabs of humanity following the previous day's slaughter. German officer Dr Weinberger noted one such example in his diary:

"13th July. At the medical detachment. Two ambulance drivers approached me in an excited mood and reported: 'What happened to us today▶

NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph

Saturday 10th July 1943

Sicily invaded. Allied armies storm island. "Beginning of end" – Roosevelt

Fighting rages as Yanks land by sea and air.

American, British and Canadian armies today invaded Sicily and, with warplanes and warships in support, battled through coastal minefields, barbed wire and gun emplacements to consolidate bridgeheads for the second front in Europe.

The invasion was preceded by a gigantic aerial blow by more than 100 American Liberator bombers from the Middle East, which smashed the general headquarters and "nerve centre of the Axis defence forces" at Taormina.

Then Allied forces under the command of General Dwight D Eisenhower struck from landing barges at night, opening the big push they had awaited since they cleared North Africa of the Axis two months ago. American and British warships formed the

invasion spearhead. Swarms of Allied bombers, fighter-bombers and fighters – engaged only yesterday in the final massive blows of aerial offensive that had rocked Sicilian targets for weeks – roared across the Mediterranean narrows at dawn and formed an aerial umbrella for the fighting men on the ground.

(Axis broadcasts said the Allies, spearheaded by parachute units and strongly supported by sea and air, landed on both southern and eastern coasts of the bomb-battered island, which is a segment of Metropolitan Italy. The Italian High Command said, "Axis armed forces are counter-attacking.")

(A German dispatch implied that the invasion was mounted from Malta and Pantelleria, saying the heaviest Allied concentrations between Gibraltar and Cyprus had [been] observed at those islands in the Sicilian straits.)

On 9th July 1943, the Allies invaded Sicily, opening a new front for the Germans. Hitler responded immediately by withdrawing forces from Kursk to Italy.



WHY HITLER...

...Abandoned Operation Citadel

The Allied invasion of Italy in July 1943 forced Hitler to move troops quickly from the Eastern Front to *Lo Stivale* (Italian Boot) to counter the Allied threat from the south and shore up his old friend Benito Mussolini.

On the evening of 13th July, the leaders of the two German fronts, Erich von Manstein and Günther von Kluge, met Adolf Hitler at his headquarters in Eastern Europe. The mood was sombre, because four days earlier Allied troops had landed in Sicily and opened a new front in Europe.

Hitler noted that Sicily would soon fall, and that the Western Allies' next objective would be a landing either on the Italian mainland or

in the Balkans. In either case, the invasion threatened the German war effort. The Führer had little confidence that his Italian allies would hold out for long without reinforcements in the form of battle-hardened German troops. Therefore, the establishment of new armies in Italy and the Balkan Peninsula was given top priority. The decision meant that the Germans were forced to remove troops from the Eastern Front, and more specifically that the Kursk

offensive now had to be brought to a halt. Historians have since pointed out that Hitler saw the situation in Italy as an excuse to stop an offensive that had already stalled, but that he lacked arguments with von Manstein, who wanted to continue the Battle of Kursk. The situation in Italy gave Hitler an excuse to overrule the general. When Mussolini was deposed shortly afterwards, Hitler had another reason to come to Italy's aid.



Benito Mussolini was deposed two weeks after the Allied landings in Sicily. Italy's new regime posed a threat to Hitler.

may not sound true, but it really happened. After we passed that little ford, you know where the burnt-out T-34 tank is, we got hopelessly stuck in the soft earth with our wounded soldiers. We were unable to move, even though we rocked the truck back and forth. Then the unthinkable happened. The advancing Russians, who had been right on our tail all along, came running up to us. But they didn't shoot! Instead, they pushed our ambulance so that we were able to get it out of the mud – and here we are!"

This surviving spark of humanity didn't stop the fighting, and thousands continued to die in the days following before the Battle of Kursk finally fizzled out for reasons other than the enormous casualties.

On the evening of 13th July, Field Marshals Erich von Manstein (Army Group South) and Günther von Kluge (Army Group Centre) were both summoned to Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia to discuss the future of the German campaign in Kursk. It was clear that the German units in the north under von Kluge couldn't sustain their attack, but should instead prepare a defence against the huge Soviet counter-offensive the Germans had realised was being established.

Von Manstein was permitted to continue a limited offensive in the south to destroy the remaining Red Army armoured forces in the area, in the hope that this would prevent a large-scale Soviet counter-offensive across a broad front. But there was no longer any question of reaching Kursk, Hitler decreed. The enemy's forces were simply too strong in the area, and at the same time the army needed the large German forces transferred elsewhere.

Overall, however, the Germans remained optimistic. During the first weeks of July, more than 200,000 German soldiers had lost their lives and over 750 tanks and self-propelled guns had been destroyed. Huge losses, yes, but nothing compared to the Soviets, who'd suffered over 850,000 dead alongside the loss of 6,000 tanks and self-propelled guns. Nevertheless, the Germans were now finding it increasingly difficult to replace their dead with new recruits, while the Soviets seemed to have endless reserves to draw on. Germany's last major offensive on the Eastern Front had been halted. At the same time, it soon became clear that many of the German tanks initially declared salvageable would have to be abandoned as the logistics troops were unable to drag them back to the front-line workshops. The new super-heavy Elephant tanks could not be pulled free by the usual rescue vehicles, while similar problems afflicted both Tiger and Panther tanks, forcing the Germans to leave the precious vehicles on the battlefield after being blown up by their crews to prevent them falling into Red

Army hands. Soviet General Vatutin, commanding the Voronezh Front at Kursk, noted in his report:

"The main enemy force, as a result of these battles, was utterly bled white and routed. On 13th July, the enemy carried out weak attacks on the Prokhorovka, Oboyan and Ivnaya axes... However, it was already clear that he had run out of steam against Kryuchenkin as well, and that his strength was at an end."

It was time for the Germans to feel the full force of the Red Army and the revenge of the Soviet Union. ■



Hundreds of German soldiers killed at Kursk were posthumously awarded the Iron Cross at ceremonies in their homeland.

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THE EASTERN FRONT

World War II's bloodiest battlefield

On 22nd June 1941, at 03.15, the first German soldiers crossed the border into the Soviet Union. The future of Europe was at stake. If the German army succeeded, Hitler's Nazi empire would have access to vast resources of steel, oil, aluminium and grain along with hundreds of arms factories and millions of fresh young men. This issue depicts the gruesome battles on the Eastern Front – from the surprise attack of Operation Barbarossa through to July 1943 when the Wehrmacht and the Red Army each threw everything they had into the Battle of Kursk.

